

MAMMOTH

I FOUND JESSE JAMES

STORY ON PAGE 8

WESTERN ANC

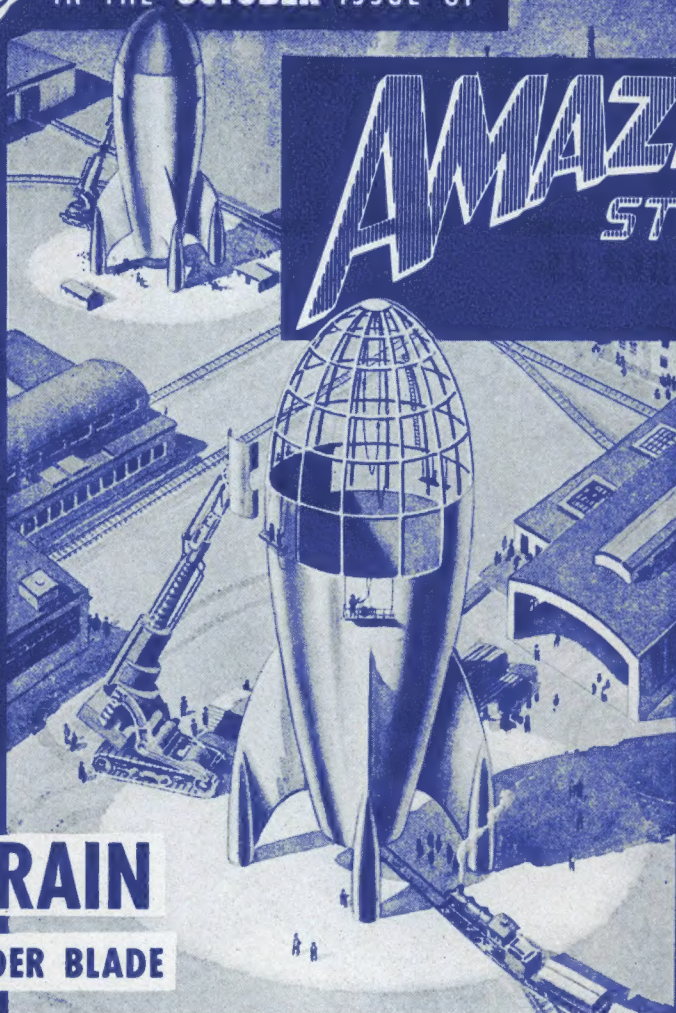
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MAMMOTH WESTERN

OCTOBER 1948

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All Stories Complete

I FOUND JESSE JAMES (True fact story) by John W. Shevlin 8

Photographs provided by John W. Shevlin

The amazing true story of the facts that prove that Jesse James is still alive!

DEATH RIDES THE RANGE (Novel) by Mildred Gordon 14

Illustrated by Bill Terry

Terror stalked through the streets of Tucson—while death rode the rangelands ...

JIMMIE MAKES THE FORT (Short) by Charles Recour 100

Illustrated by T. E. Willis

Jimmie wanted to be a soldier not a schoolboy—for there were Kiowas to be killed!

DOUBLED IN BLOOD (Novelette) by Guy Archette 114

Illustrated by Bill Terry

He rode the shotgun trail with one purpose in life—to write his name in blood!

TROUBLE WILL FIND YOU (Short) by H. B. Hickey 138

Illustrated by Walter H. Hinton

Ken Taylor's bitterness showed in his eyes—for he carried the outcast's brand ...

Front cover painting by Arnold Kohn, illustrating
a scene from "Death Rides the Range."

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RIDIN' HERD

with the Editor



THIS month we've really got a treat for all you fans. No doubt you have read in your local newspapers about the discovery of Jesse James—alive—down in Lawton, Oklahoma. Yep, in case you haven't heard, Jesse, America's most famous outlaw is still alive! He's a hundred years old, but with as keen a mind as you'd ever want to meet. He's been living for years under the name of J. Frank Dalton. (Dalton was a buddy of Jesse's, and was a member of Quantrell's Guerillas. Dalton died, and Jesse adopted his name.) Right here and now your editors want to go on record as saying that we know that Dalton is Jesse James. We have seen indisputable evidence—the same evidence that you will be seeing in your newspapers and through other channels before very long. But what's more important, we have the personal story (in this issue) of the man who knew Dalton at the turn of the Century, and who has followed him down through the years to unearth this world-shaking fact.

HOLD on now! We know you're snickerin' and sayin' these here editors have gone plumb loco! Well, mebbe so, but then again, mebbe not. From where we're sittin' on the corral fence we think we've got somethin' mighty important, and after you read John Shevlin's own story, "I Found Jesse James", starting on page 8, then we reckon you'll be more inclined to agree with us. Most of you may have seen Jesse in the newsreels, and if you have, then you also saw a picture of Jesse when he was a young man. That the two men are one and the same is a startling fact, but when you tie in affidavits from countless people who knew Jesse James a way back when, and the report of hand-writing experts, and many others, then it doesn't seem so startling. It seems matter of fact—which it is! So now you can start readin' John Shevlin's personal account of how he found Jesse James. After you read it, drop us a line and let us know what you think about this important discovery.

NEXT in line this month is the book-length novel we promised you—"Death Rides the Range." The author, Mildred Gordon, a very talented lass with a pen, has come across with one of the best, suspense-

packed western novels we've seen in many a day. This story is something different, we guarantee you—a yarn laid in the modern West, a story of terror and death on the range. Mildred, by the way, is a close friend of Mary Jane Ward, the author of that best-selling novel, "The Snake Pit." Well, we think that Mildred is a heck of a fine writer too, and after you finish reading her novel we'll bet you'll agree. What's the story about? Well, we don't want to spoil anything for you, but we will say that it starts out with a weddin' at a small Mission outside of Tucson—and then suddenly the wedding bells are a funeral dirge as death and murder step into the ceremony. What happens after that you'll have to find out for yourself!

CHARLES Recour rode in with a neat little yarn the other day, entitled, "Jim-mie Makes the Fort." It's an unusual short story about a youngster who didn't want to go to school, but wanted instead to join the Army. Of course he was a mite young for that sort of thing, but when it came to shootin' Injuns he was right up there with the best of the U. S. Cavalry. We won't say any more about it here, but you'll have some fine reading pleasure with this story or we miss our guess.

GUY Archette is back this month with a rip-snortin' novelette, entitled, "Doubled In Blood." This is the story of a man who thought he was somebody else. And he thought about it so hard that he went out and durn near proved it! But in order to prove it he had to face a hail of gunsmoke and blood—some of his own. It's a hard, tough story, about hard, tough people. You'll find plenty of action and suspense waiting for you.

FINISHING up this issue is H. B. Hickey's latest story, "Trouble Will Find You." This is one of those swell character yarns that Hickey is popular for. It concerns a man with an outcast brand on him, a man with the world against him and no place to turn, until—Well, you'll find out what happened when you read the story. All of which about completes the roundup for this month. And next month we've got a star-packed herd waiting. See you then . . . Rap

COWHIDE CRUSHER

BY FRANCES YERXA

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA is rich in tales of derring-do of the Old West. We've become so accustomed to think of the West in terms of cowboys and cattlemen that we forget that besides the Indians, a sizable portion of the west was settled by people whose native tongue was Spanish. That fact is evidenced today not only by the people still living there but by the tremendous influence the Spanish style of architecture has had on our own.

The noble Spanish hidalgos who ruled vast tracts of land in the old days, maintained what almost amounted to royal courts of their own. They ruled with iron hands and were not only feared and respected but also loved for their justice was honest.

Unfortunately the nobles had a tendency to be quite severe in their punishments which gave them an unfair name. They were regarded as cruel and by our standards they were, but in that rugged country, weaklings did not live long.

Consider the case of Senorita Carmella Diaz, only daughter of one of the noblest of Southern California families. Carmella was worshipped by her father and two brothers and the young Spanish gentry of the neighborhood lolled at her feet for just a glimpse or a word from her.

Peter Callett, a cruel rough and tough from the California goldfields had traveled South. When he came upon the estate of Senor, The Don Diaz, he was treated so cordially and hospitably that it was inevitable that he make himself a more or less permanent guest. He had a way with women too and more than one serving lass felt his caresses. When he was introduced by chance to Carmella, he knew that he had to have her and he spared no pains in his courting. He was fairly well equipped with money, but nothing that he did made the slightest impression on the girl—not all his entreaties. She spurned him completely.

His passion drove him to madness. One night, he caught her in the garden and brutally assaulted her, leaving her more dead than alive. Eventually she recovered, but the impression of that horrible night remained engraved on her memory for a long time.

When Callett realized the enormity of his crime—and it didn't take long, he headed north in a hurry. He knew that retribution

would follow swiftly and surely. When the crime was discovered, the brothers and several of the girl's suitors swore that they would leave no stone unturned in their efforts to apprehend Peter Callett.

HE had gotten a twelve hour start on his pursuers and he was well toward the railroad. He boarded a train for San Francisco where he knew for a certainty he could lose himself in the growing city. What chance did the Spaniards who weren't particularly liked at the time anyway, have of catching him?

The chase lasted almost seven months. Peter Callett was a crafty man in some respects and he knew how relentless his pursuers were. He used every conceivable device to throw them off his trail. But tenaciously, the Spaniards kept on his trail, determined not to give in.

Finally they caught him, and by strategy and guile, Peter Callett was taken back to the hacienda of Don Estaban Diaz. The captors had a difficult time to prevent not only their associates, but themselves as well, from tearing the man apart.

Peter Cattlett shortly disappeared and nothing more was ever heard of him. But a few miles from the Diaz household was a small canyon, hot as the very devil in the blazing sun. For a long while, it was possible to see a skeleton in that canyon, the skeleton of Peter Cattlett and wrapped around it was the remnants of a cowhide.

That torturous death that was applied to Peter Cattlett was a favorite with numbers of primitive peoples including the Apaches. The man to be killed by the hideous torture was wrapped in a freshly peeled, water-soaked hide—a "green" hide—and put out in the sun. The result was horrid and obvious. As the intense rays of the sun burned down on the helpless man wrapped in the soaking hide, the water evaporated and the hide contracted like the jaws of an encircling vise. What horrible pain that gradual compression must have caused. Bound helplessly the man could do nothing but await the inevitable end.

Cruel and terrible as was this torturous death by our standards, it was an effective warning in its way. Many a wrong-doer would-be—was prevented from indulging his passion by the thought of what had happened to Peter Callett.

I Found Jesse James

by John W. Shevlin

**Jesse James, the most famous outlaw
in American History is alive! And here is the
true inside story by the man who found him . . .**

HISTORY says that Jesse James was shot in the back of the head by Bob Ford on April 3, 1882, while he was supposedly masquerading under the name of Tom Howard in St. Joseph, Missouri. But history is wrong.

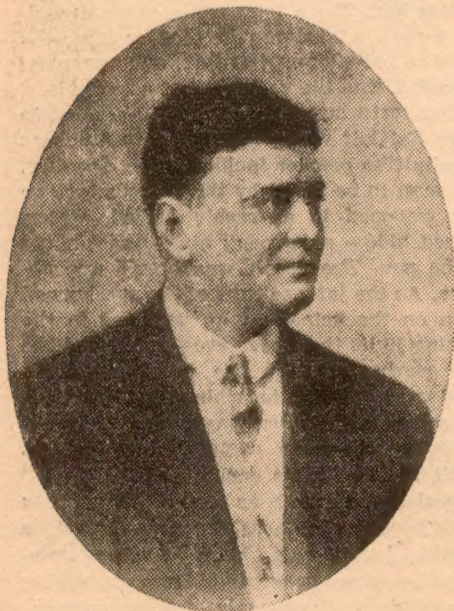
Jesse James was alive in 1901 in St. Louis, Missouri. I know, because I saw him there. And further—he is alive today.

I am making this statement knowing that many people will laugh, while

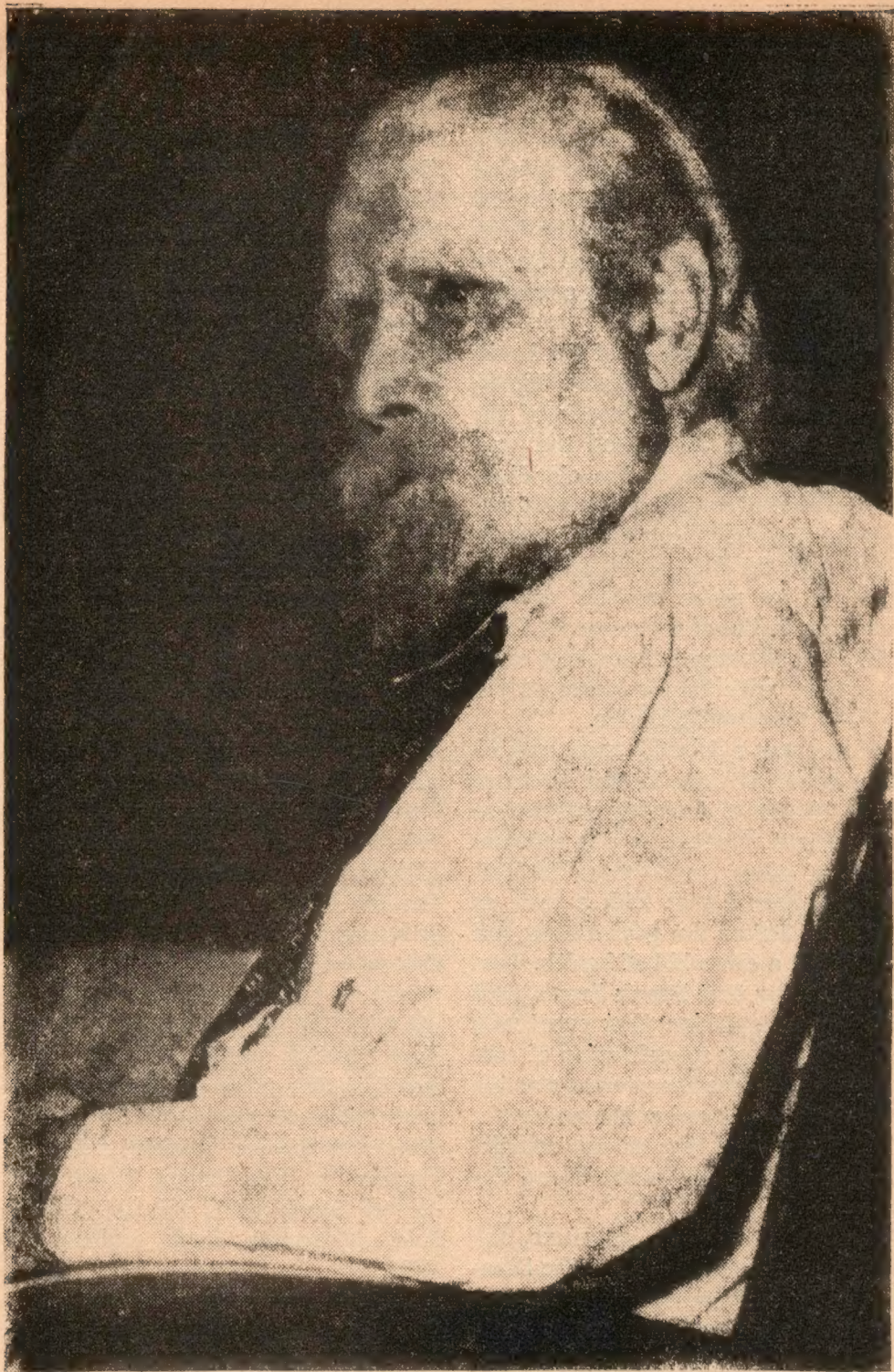
others will scoff. But I know that there are many others who will recognize the truth in what I have to say.

I have always been, by profession, a criminal investigator. My life's work has been the apprehending of men wanted by the law. In that profession I have achieved what I like to think is a certain amount of success, especially when I consider the fact that in the early 1900's the facilities at the command of a law enforcement officer were somewhat meager, what with the process of fingerprinting being in its infancy and almost an unheard of proposition in the Southwest territories. In those days a lawman had to depend on his wits and memory, and especially his memory. It was the mark of a good lawman who would never forget a face even though years might elapse between meetings of the individuals. I have always prided myself on the retention of that quality, so vital in my work at the turn of the century.

The Jesse James affair, as far as I was concerned, began for me at the turn of the century. At the time I was a detective with the St. Louis, Missouri police department. St. Louis in those days was quite a different town



Chief of Detectives, John W. Shevlin



One of America's most Glamorous figures, Colonel J. Frank Dalton, aged 100, who is in reality the famed western outlaw—Jesse James

from the St. Louis of today. It was a city large enough to hide wanted men in its opium dens in Chinatown, and especially the area known as "Hop Alley", a section of the city located between Seventh and Eighth, Market and Walnut streets. It was the doorway to the badlands of the Southwest, and the trail of many a wanted man began there.

It was in this section of St. Louis, late in the '90's that Frank James, brother and fellow desperado of the famous outlaw, Jesse, had the position of doorkeeper at the old Standard Theatre located at Seventh and Market streets. It was the custom in those days for detectives from Headquarters to make nightly routine checkups in the area known as "Hop Alley." In this way I frequently came in contact with Frank James at the near-by Standard Theatre.

Frank was a friendly man, and after a period of time, he and I became good friends, exchanging confidences on matters relating to the criminal world of other days—when he himself had been a man with a price on his head, before the government had given him a clean bill of health. I am not inferring that Frank James gave me any information that eventually led to the direct apprehension of other outlaws. Quite the reverse was the case. But he did enjoy discussing the "old days" and the many colorful characters he had known along the owlhoot.

On many of these occasions, my visits with Frank James at the Standard, I noticed another man, the ticket-seller, who appeared to be quite friendly with Frank, and assisted him in many of his duties. At the time I never attached any importance to the incident.

In 1902, while still a member of the

St. Louis Police Department, I was appointed Chief of Detectives of the Hot Springs, Arkansas, Reservation. I left St. Louis, and a year later, in Hot Springs, a man turned up who I knew I had seen before. It was the assistant to Frank James, the ticket-seller of the Standard Theatre.

This man applied for a license to operate a shooting gallery in what was known as "Happy Hollow" near McCloud's Photograph Gallery. He had given his name as Frank Dalton, and posted a sign on the shooting gallery calling himself "The Champion Rifle Shot of the World." He did a terrific business, offering a \$500 prize to any man who could best him. So far as I know, nobody ever did.

IT WAS a short time after this, during the World's Fair in St. Louis, in 1903, that I had occasion to meet Frank James again. I was being carried on the payrolls of both cities, St. Louis, and Hot Springs, as a law officer at that time. Consequently I was obliged to alternate my time between the two cities during the Fair. Shortly before the close of the Fair, Frank James came to Headquarters and asked me to come along and meet an old friend of his. We went to the Standard Theatre, and there I was introduced to Cole Younger who had just been released from the Stillwater, Minnesota prison. Younger, a former member of the James gang, had served thirty years for the Northfield, Minnesota bank robbery in 1872.

Frank had a purpose in wanting me to meet Younger, and while we met on friendly terms, it turned out that my official connections were desired. Frank and Cole told me they had invested money in a Wild West Show that was playing in East St. Louis,

John W. Shevlin as
he appears today



and that there was some trouble with a mob of pickpockets, who were injuring the business of the show. I went along with Cole to East St. Louis and took the matter up with the authorities there. The situation was taken care of at once, and Cole thanked me profusely. Shortly after, Frank, Cole and I were talking over old times at the Show, and I happened to remark about the ticket-seller who had been with Frank, moving down to Hot Springs and opening up a shooting gallery. I mentioned the name of Frank Dalton, and while at the time I took no special notice of the fact, both men seemed uneasy and did not appear anxious to talk about Dalton.

I mentioned to them that Dalton ought to be with their show as he was a crack rifle shot, but they both passed the remark. Then, Cole Younger said something to me that

has been a mystery in my mind for years. He looked at me, a smile playing around the corner of his lips as he rested against a wagon tongue, and said: "John, someday a story is going to come out that will amaze the world."

That remark seemed to have no bearing at the time, although I was interested in knowing what he meant. But I refrained from questioning him because in those days you didn't ask too many questions in a friendly conversation. Today, however, I know what Cole Younger meant. He meant that the true story of Jesse James would someday be revealed, and that Frank Dalton, the companion of Frank James in St. Louis at the Standard Theatre, was in reality Jesse James.

From that time on, my life took a change and I lost track of Frank and Cole. I left Hot Springs after my

term as Chief of Detectives expired, and took up law and newspaper work.

In Billings, Montana, in 1938, I established *The Yellowstone*, a weekly newspaper devoted to the cattle and stockmen's industry. The paper soon became the official publication of the International Cowboys' Association, and carried a full page devoted to the interest of the Association throughout the southwest.

My wife, Nellie M. Shevlin, was elected Historian of the International Cowboys' Association in 1939, and in that capacity, conducted a column in the paper entitled, "When the West Was Young", which became popular throughout the southwest. My wife received a letter one day from Sloane Matthews, Texas' "Wagon Boss" of the Association, recommending that a Frank Dalton, of Longview, Texas, be admitted for membership in the group. He met the qualifications for membership, and after joining, carried on a continuous correspondence with my wife, contributing interesting articles and anecdotes on the "Old West."

I speculated at the time on the possibility of this Frank Dalton being the same Frank Dalton I had known years before. But since the matter didn't merit any particular attention at the time, I didn't bother to follow it up.

THEN IN 1941 the *Yellowstone* paper was sold and I moved to Chicago with my wife. We both lost track of Frank Dalton for a number of years then, until one morning in March of this year my wife picked up a morning paper and saw a picture on the back page with a caption stating that a Frank Dalton was celebrating his one hundredth birthday in a hospital in Texas. My wife immedi-

ately sat down and wrote Dalton a letter, congratulating him on his anniversary and asking him if he was the same Dalton who had belonged to the International Cowboys' Association. At the same time my memory was turning over the name of Dalton, and also the photograph of him that appeared in the newspaper. I suddenly knew that though age had changed the man, it was the same Frank Dalton that I had known in St. Louis, and later, Hot Springs, some 48 years previous. I remarked to my wife at the time that it was indeed a coincidence that I had known this man at the turn of the century. She agreed with me, but still neither of us attached any great importance to the fact.

Then came Dalton's letter from Texas.

If ever a man was shaken in his shoes, I was that man. The letter from Dalton, to my wife, stated that he, Dalton, had been trying to find her for a number of years. He stated that he had a story to tell—the story of his life, and that he had vowed he would tell it only to the Historian of the International Cowboys' Association. That story, he said, was the history-shaking fact that Jesse James was alive, and that he, Frank Dalton, was Jesse James!

I read that letter over and over. And each time I read it, and looked again at the photograph of Dalton that had appeared in the Chicago newspaper, I became more convinced. I knew, definitely, positively, that this man not only was the companion of Frank James in St. Louis in 1901, but also his brother—and the whole picture suddenly became real, alive, each piece fitting into its proper place.

I knew suddenly why Frank James had been close to this man, I also

knew why Cole Younger had made that statement to me. He had made it because when I mentioned Frank Dalton to him he had known that Dalton's real name was Jesse James and that the story that would amaze the world was the story that Jesse was still alive!

I knew at once that I would have to visit Dalton within the near future. And my wife, as startled over the turn of events as I was, also knew that, as I did, the story was too vast to be handled alone. She immediately consulted Raymond A. Palmer, Editor of the Ziff-Davis magazines, who had been a kind friend for the past few years in Chicago, and at Mr. Palmer's request and direction, she immediately went to Lawton, Oklahoma to see Dalton. (He had moved from the Texas hospital).

I was anxious to go myself, but business in Chicago kept me here for the time being. But my wife arrived and renewed her acquaintance with Dalton, taking down his memoirs for him, as he wished her to do.

Then finally, on May 1st of this year I arrived in Lawton, Oklahoma. In all my years as a criminal investigator I don't believe I was as nervous as I was when I stepped into the room and faced Frank Dalton, propped up in bed recovering from a broken hip.

As I have stated earlier, a lawman had to depend on his memory of faces and characteristics in the old days. As I walked into that room I knew that this was to be the greatest test my memory would ever face.

I stood there and looked at him. Neither of us spoke. I don't believe I could have spoken at that moment. Instead, the old man's face broke into a smile and he said: "Hello, John, I see you've shaved off your mous-

tache."

Had I not recognized him, that would have been enough. Because when I first knew Dalton in St. Louis, and later when I talked to him in Hot Springs in 1903, I had been wearing a moustache. But it was unnecessary. I knew him. He was Frank Dalton. The Frank Dalton I had seen in the company of Frank James many times. The Frank Dalton that Cole Younger had referred to as the greatest story that would ever break and amaze the world. The Frank Dalton who had been the best rifle marksman I have ever seen. The Frank Dalton who was in reality—Jesse James!

WHAT HAS happened in the weeks since, and what will happen in the next few months you will read more about in other channels. This is only to acquaint you with the facts that started in 1901, and followed me through the years. Facts behind what is the greatest story of our century. You may believe these facts, as you read them, or you may not. That is your privilege. But I knew Jesse James in 1901, 19 years after his supposed death in St. Joseph, Missouri. I have known of him off and on through the passing years. And today I swear that this man, known as Frank Dalton, is, beyond any shadow of a doubt the living proof of the song that was written of him:

This song was made -

By Billy Gashade,

As soon as the news did arrive;

He said there was no man

With the law in his hand,

Who could take Jesse James alive!

And the song was true. No man could take Jesse James alive. And no man ever took him—dead!

Jesse James lives in this year of our Lord, 1948.

DEATH RIDES THE RANGE

BY MILDRED GORDON

The wedding bells rang joyously at the old San Xavier Mission that night—but then out of the darkness of the desert came a gunshot—and death . . .

I WAS SITTING in the patio of the Frontier hotel with my big moment, Hank Noyes, thinking that if he proposed to me again I believed I'd accept, when Hank glanced away, the bells suddenly stopped ringing and over in the doorway stood Dyanne Kayne.

"Whom do you suppose that little brass-plated golddigger has her claws out for now?" I mused, watching Dyanne make an elegant entrance.

"Unruffle your hackles, lamb chop," Hank said. "That dame's man hunting or I don't know women. She's not after you."

"I'm not so sure. On her last man hunt she mowed down females like a hungry tiger in a petunia bed."

"Could be me, you know." Hank grinned at me and put on his hungry wolf face. His deceptively innocent-looking, wide blue eyes laughed. They'd gotten him more than one newspaper scoop—the eyes, I mean. Maybe the wolf face, too.

"Heaven help you," I snapped. "I certainly won't."

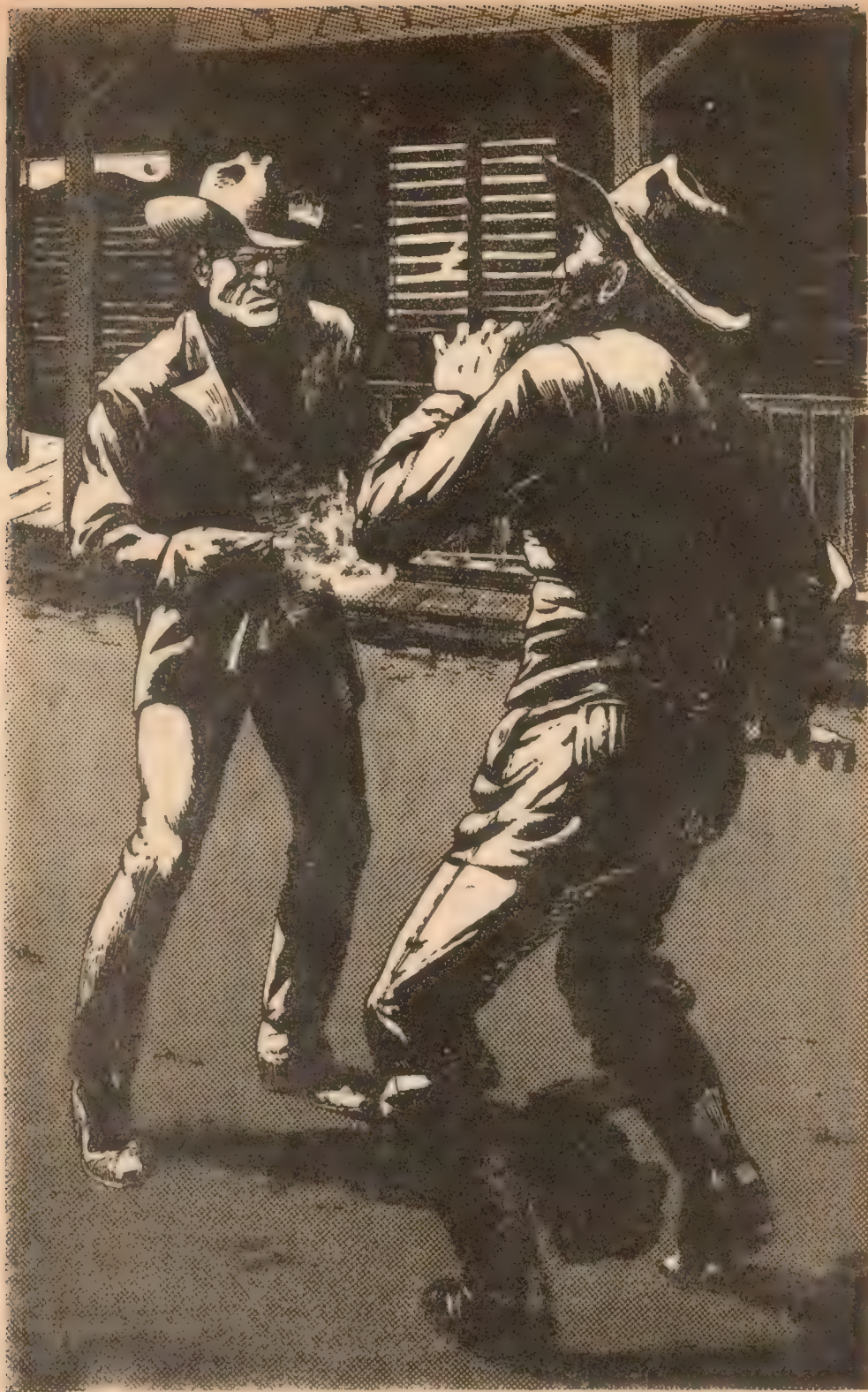
Even from my prejudiced point of view, Dyanne looked just as desirable and fetching as when I last had seen her some eight years ago when she had come to Tucson ostensibly to attend a semester at the University of Arizona. Her mother had died a few years before, leaving her an orphan, and her guardian, my old friend, Lock Trayton, had asked me

to get her launched. I should have had better sense because I'm not so blind I don't recognize a false front when I see one, but how was I to know where it would all lead?

As far as the fellows were concerned, Dy was a cinch to put over. She had a sweet figure and knew what to put on it. She could drink zombies and hold them, and her dancing sent the rest of us girls flying to Arthur Murray. But worst of all, she had a dark little pixie face set with enormous blue eyes, the gleams in which simply reached out and dragged 'em in. Why, even Hank, my own boy friend—but that's another story.

I hit a snag, though, when I tried to sell her to my girl friends. Maybe my efforts lacked enthusiasm but I did succeed in getting her into my sorority with the result that half the girls later wanted to commit mayhem on me. Dy repaid me by making a play for all my married friends' husbands, breaking up half the engaged couples and finally picking off poor Cowhide Terry who was about to marry his childhood sweetheart. The pay-off came when, failing to make the Junior League a few months later, she shouted from the rooftops that I—I, mind you—was jealous and had kept her out. She never spoke to me after that, which was plenty all right with me.

Like most debutante-cowboy ro-



The mule staggered backward as the shadowed figure shot point-blank at him . . .

mances, her marriage to Cowhide blew sky high. After two stormy months, she went back East, and my friends eventually forgave me. After graduation, I returned to the Tres Santos ranch, in the Baboquivari mountains southwest of Tucson, which my brother, Bill, and I have been running since the death of our parents.

I'd practically forgotten Dyanne, but here she was again, and she hadn't changed a bit. That type never does. She came floating up to me in that ballet gait of hers, threw her arms about me, knocking my hat down over one eye and my hair with it, pecked me behind the ear and gushed, "Bucky, dar-ling!"

I pulled myself together and kept my mouth tightly shut, struggling not to say what was on the tip of my tongue. She flowed on.

"Dear, dear Bucky. You look positively ravishing. Such a darling, dreamy tan. I must get one before I go back to that nasty East. But do tell me about yourself. How have you been And Hank! Hank, dar-ling!" She bent over him daintily with her lips puckered up, then stopped half way to his forehead and put a beautifully manicured forefinger on her pouty little mouth.

She shot me another glance and wagged her finger. "Oh—oh, how cute! I'll bet you two are . . ."

"We are not!" I said emphatically. I rose to go.

"Oh, Bucky, dear, you don't have to go, do you? The most wonderful thing has happened. It's too dreamy for words. I've been looking for you for hours to tell you." She let her glance drop coyly, then looked up at us earnestly out of those big blue eyes. The same old snare, I thought. "Cowhide and I are going to take the vows again."

That dropped me, quickly, like a clip under the knees. "You and Cowhide!" I gasped.

I'VE KNOWN Cowhide Terry for a good many years, or thought I knew him—a long, lanky, typical cowboy with a lot more sense than you'd

at first think, judging from his slow, laconic speech. He and Frances Crandell had been sweethearts all of their lives and up to the time Dy came along, Frances was a sweet, rather shy thing who thought the world was a big, lovely place called paradise where Cowhide Terry lived. How in the world Dy horned in on that set-up, I'll never know. If I did, I'd have the key to one of the world's oldest and most baffling mysteries.

Anyway, Dyanne had brought Cowhide, lassoed and hobbled with a piggin string, to the fine, old, carved-mesquite altar of San Xavier mission near Tucson and married him. When he finally got his eyes open, it was too late. He left Dyanne, Francie forgave him and they couldn't help going right on being sweethearts. But Dy had him helpless as a roped calf. She wouldn't give him a divorce.

"Bucky," Cowhide told me not long after the separation. "I know I went plumb loco and I ought to be horse whipped for what I did to Francie. But what I've been through the last two months shouldn't happen to a Brahma steer. How in hell that female wolf ever got her brand on me, I'll never know."

And here she was with her branding irons red hot again! If anyone in Arizona could recognize the smell of scorched hair and hide, it ought to be Cowhide Terry. Why, in the name of Geronimo, had he let himself get caught in Dy's spring round-up again?

"The most wonderful thing happened," Dy continued. "Uncle Charley died, you know. Poor dear, he committed suicide. But they couldn't find his body, so the nasty old judge wouldn't let me have his money until he'd been dead seven years. Isn't that the silliest thing? Everyone knew he was dead."

Old Charley Kayne's suicide had made the headlines. After grubbing a half million dollars in gold dust from the Arizona hills, he had grown weary of a life of luxury in a Fifth avenue apartment, or so the sob sisters reported, and had jumped in the

East river, leaving a suicide note in his car.

"So dear Uncle's will was probated the other day and Cowhide and I get all his money."

So that was it! "You mean it's no Cowhide, no money?" Hank asked in blunt newspaperman fashion.

"Now, Hank, don't be crude," she said with honeyed sweetness, running her slender hand through his curly hair. "Cowhide and I had our misunderstandings but that's all over now. We're going to try it again, just like Uncle wanted and this time, we're going to make it work."

"You mean that if you don't go back to Cowhide, you don't get Uncle Charley's money?"

Dyanne pouted prettily. "Bucky, you make it sound so—so sordid. It's just that poor Uncle was such a romantic old dear. He—he asked us in his will to sort of go through the wedding again, just as we did eight years ago, with the same people and everything exactly like it was, out at the Mission. Isn't it sweet? Uncle thought we would 'recapture the rapture of those moments when we were bound eternally in wedlock.' Those were his very words. Isn't it too delirious?"

"Delirious is exactly the word," I replied.

"Bucky, darling, you will help me, won't you? Aunt Louella has called Father Saltra and he is going to read the vows and have everything fixed just as it was the first time. You will be a dear and accompany me, won't you? You were my maid of honor, remember?"

REMEMBER? How could I forget? I even recall thinking a lot of very bitter thoughts as I marched down the aisle behind the Elison twins and Cora Makeby. Ye gods, Cora Makeby! I indulged myself in a quick laugh and said, with no little satisfaction, "It can't be done, Dy. Remember Cora Makeby? Well, she's Mrs. William Wiltz now and she's about to have a baby."

Dyanne's discomforture was beautiful to see. Her baby doll face slid

off and she looked like a caged jay-bird. "Damn," she said and stamped her foot. "She'll look like hell," she added.

I smiled nastily. "But you don't understand. She just couldn't go through with it."

"She hasn't had it yet, has she?"

"No."

"Then she's got to go through with it. Tonight. I can't sit around this hole twiddling my thumbs while she's in the hospital. I want my money and I'm not going to wait."

"You've waited seven years, haven't you?"

"That's just it. I'm not going to wait another two weeks for anybody's blessed event. Be a good scout, Bucky, and call her. Make it tomorrow night. She'll have to get her dress altered." Dy paused to contemplate the mental picture. "All I ask," she added, "is that she doesn't have her darned baby at my wedding."

I was so outraged I couldn't trust my tongue with my vocabulary, not there in the hotel patio, so I took Hank by the arm and sailed out. In the lobby I caught Hank staring at me, grinning.

"Well, what are you looking at?" I asked sharply.

"A strictly gorgeous blonde," he said. "An imp with green eyes and palomino hair."

"My eyes are gray, Hank Noyes, as you darned well know."

"Not now, they aren't, sister. That Dyanne gal's got you going."

"Go beat your typewriter, Mr. Noyes," I told him. "You're annoying me." I stalked off.

Dyanne did have me going, of course, and I had a sneaking feeling even then that she would have her way, which she did. She called Cora herself, explained her predicament, and intimated that I was standing in the way of her filthy half million. Cora is a lamb but Dy didn't pull the wool over her eyes. Cora called me and said that it wasn't often she got any satisfaction out of her present appearance but that she thought it would give her just that, to add a note of ridiculousness to Dy's so-o-o

perfect ceremony.

All the others agreed to the farce—the Elison twins and Lock Trayton who had given Dyanne away—but I still balked.

"Go on making an ass of yourself," Hank told me later that night. "You know what people will say. That you're a rotten sport. That Dyanne dame will crucify you—but quick."

I hesitated and Hank pressed his advantage. "Besides," he added, "where is your curiosity? You know you'd rather break a leg than miss that ceremony."

He was so right, of course, and that was why I got so mad. Sometimes I wish Hank didn't understand me so well. I blew up and Hank went off grinning, to wait till I cooled down. I managed to get hold of Cowhide briefly on the 'phone and it was he who finally convinced me. "Francie and I have to play ball with her, Bucky," he told me. "Please string along. It's our only hope." Then he added in a low voice as though he feared he'd be overhead, "I can't explain now but we have a plan."

Luckily for Dyanne, it was rodeo time and all of us lonesome desert rats had already trekked into Tucson and dumped our packs at the Frontier hotel; otherwise she would have had as much trouble rounding us up from our ranchos as a cowpoke bringing in some stray mavericks.

THE next afternoon, late, found me perforce wearing a silly taf-feta bridesmaid's dress of a sickly orchid shade which I loathe and which is extremely unbecoming to me and which reminded me unpleasantly that I had put on a good inch around the middle since I wore the monstrosity the first time. Dyanne, the Elison twins, Louella Regan—who is Dy's aunt—and I were gathered in Dy's suite, waiting for the arrival of Cowhide and Lock Trayton to complete the party. The ordeal was set for six-thirty, and it was now well past five-thirty. Dyanne in her wedding gown would leap out of her chair, whereupon the twins would have to leap, too, to hold up her train, and they would pace up and down the

room a few times, then Dy would flop down again. She was alternately turning on the charm and the vituperation. It was all Cowhide's fault, holding us up, and she kept piling abuse on his head until I think she finally sold herself on the possibility that maybe Cowhide had changed his mind and didn't intend to show up.

"Louella, call the lobby again and see if they've come," Dy ordered.

"But I just called, Dyanne."

"Oh, dammit, call again." Louella went to the telephone the second time in five minutes but I noticed she kept the cradle pressed down with her finger as she talked. She had hardly hung up and reported they hadn't come when, to her consternation, the 'phone rang.

"Well, it's about time," Dy said, getting up and reaching for her purse.

Louella answered, then handed the instrument to Dy. "Someone wants to talk to you."

Dy snatched up the 'phone. "Yes," she snapped into the transmitter. "Yes, this is Dyanne Kayne . . . I don't believe it . . ." Then, still imperious but not with the same self assurance, "That's preposterous. And I'm not in the mood for jokes."

She started to hang up the receiver when her hand stopped in mid-air. A queer look came into her haggard eyes, her mouth trembled and as I stared at her in amazement, her face fairly fell to pieces.

"Just—just a minute, please," she said into the 'phone, and to the rest of us, "Would you mind going into the other room while I finish this call?"

Louella reeled around and stared incredulously. Dy had managed to pull her face together again, half way, and attempted a smile. Lou caught my eyes and shook her head, and we followed the twins into the adjoining room. But we did mind.

"Now I'm getting fidgety," Louella muttered, looking at her watch. After what seemed ages, we heard the 'phone ring in the other room. Dy called to us and said to come along, the men were ready at last. Lock

Trayton, who had given the bride away in the original ceremony, was taking the other members of the party in his station wagon. So I asked Louella to ride out with me.

"Well, I'll see you in church, as they say," Dy tossed over her shoulder in an effort at lightness. But I had caught a glimpse of her face. Dyanne looked like a ghoul just returned from a particularly nasty grave-robbing expedition.

Chapter II

CONGRESS street as far west as I could see through a dust-laden windshield was packed solid with a wriggling mass of autos, horses, jalopies, covered wagons, cowboys and Tucsonians dressed like cowboys, chuck wagons and all the fantastic vehicles and characters you always see on the eve of Tucson's annual rodeo, the *Fiesta de los Vaqueros*. As I maneuvered old Random, my ancient Ford, toward Stone avenue, I got madder by the moment.

I was furious at the Papago Indian who got his horse and wagon through the stop light, making me miss it, mad at the diminutive burro and its three-hundred-pound rider in front of me, and annoyed at a happily-inebriated, pseudo cowboy out in the middle of Stone and Congress, directing traffic to a complete blockade.

When I got across the Santa Cruz bridge and finally managed to pass the Papago and his wagon, and didn't have to mutter to myself about the traffic, I got down to fundamentals, Dyanne and her infernal second wedding. The first one had caused about all the trouble one wedding and one lone person were capable of, I thought, but the repeat performance presaged even more.

If I entertained bitter thoughts about Dyanne Kayne, Louella Regan must have harbored a thousand-fold more. When Dyanne's invalid mother died some ten years ago in the fine New York apartment old Charley Kayne had furnished, Louella had promised her sister she would look after Dyanne, then a

grown-up brat of sixteen, as long as she needed her. It seemed to me that Louella had served far and above the call of duty and why she still stuck by Dy, I couldn't figure out. Dy had always treated her like a servant, or, worse still, like poor relations.

Skirting "A" mountain cautiously, I opened old Random up to a vibration-packed forty miles an hour and headed south over the familiar desert road to San Xavier mission. The sun was a huge orange balloon going down behind the purple-black Tucson mountains. Giant sahuaro cacti, bold and black, like an army of stalwart men, marched down the steep foothills to the roadside, and dense, dark thickets of mesquite crowded in closely.

"Do you think Dy really intends to go through with it, Lou?" I asked. "I mean carry out the spirit as well as the letter of the will?"

She didn't answer immediately and I slid her a quick glance out of the corner of my eye. She returned it, probing, I thought, to see what I was driving at. I didn't know much about Louella Regan then. That was scarcely a month ago, yet now I feel as though I'd known her forever. It's funny how one event can bring to light all the facets of even a complex character, many of which normally would require a lifetime of intimate association to uncover.

I hadn't seen Louella since Dy blew out of town years ago. She was just as I remembered her—handsome, impeccably dressed, calm, though she looked all of her thirty years. The word that always came to mind at the memory of Louella's high-browed, intelligent face was "control", probably because I had watched her handle Dy so skilfully, but seeing those restless, watching eyes, I was reminded of a wartime expression. Her face always looked as though it had just been alerted.

"Dy's been treating it as a colossal farce," she said finally. "She was terribly pleased with herself after she had seen Cowhide and talked him into it."

We drove in silence for a while, lost in our thoughts. Mine had to do

with old Charley Kayne. I never knew him personally, as he operated in northern Arizona, but according to my old friend, Lock Trayton, he was a pretty swell guy; a bit eccentric but pure gold at heart. Lock says he used to sit in his swank Fifth avenue apartment with his stockinged feet on a slender Hepplewhite table, a corn-cob pipe stuck in his wizened face which always bristled with straw-white spines like a cholla cactus, and puff smoke so potent that it effectively exterminated all plant and insect life in the room.

Charley Kayne had spent the best twenty years of his life digging a fortune out of the Arizona mountains and the last twenty asking himself, "For what?" For by the time he had accumulated fifty years, five hundred thousand dollars and the irremediable squint, stoop, indigestion and general characteristics of a hard-rock prospector, romance was out of the question and he was sharp enough not to marry a fortune seeker. I marveled that he could retain a spark of sentiment in his make-up. Surely he held no illusions regarding Dyanne. He had tried to live under her roof, hadn't he, and committed suicide?

WHY ON earth would he make such a stipulation in his will?" I wondered aloud to Louella. "I've heard he was eccentric but, well, it's ridiculous—Dy and Cowhide settling down to married bliss."

"I suppose you don't know the background," Louella said thoughtfully. "Though, of course, Uncle Charley's fantastic ideas can't be placed on a completely rational basis. You see, Stewart Kayne—Dy's father, that is—and Charley were brothers and very close. Stew had been a bit on the wild side before his marriage and when his wife—my sister—heard of one of his escapades, she divorced him. He was so broken hearted he committed suicide, never knowing he was to become a father.

"Charley Kayne once told me that if Dy's mother had been forgiving and hadn't divorced Stew, they probably would have been happy. Dy never had a fair start, he claimed. I don't

think he ever held any real affection for Dy but strangely enough he was a religious old duck. Believed divorce was sinful and that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children—that sort of thing."

"And what happens if Dy doesn't go back to Cowhide?"

"Everything goes to a foundation for homeless prospectors," Louella replied.

Well, I had to admit, much as I disliked Dy, that I couldn't blame her a lot. If a crackpot uncle of mine were bequeathing me a half million dollars if, and only if, I re-enacted a marriage which had been on the rocks for years, I'd probably quick do a lot of hatchet burying myself, grab the dough and to heck with sentiment.

They say that opposite types attract and while I don't hold to the theory myself, still, I can't think of anything else that could have joined Dyanne Kayne and Cowhide Terry. When they were first married, Cowhide was, as he is now, as simple and direct by nature as his speech was laconic, even to the point of appearing a bit dumb on the surface. Dy, by contrast, was complex and provocative on the surface and dumb underneath. Otherwise she wouldn't have attempted to make Cowhide over completely, beginning with his name. He'd gotten along with "Cowhide" for nearly twenty years, he had told her, and he reckoned it would do all right for the marriage license.

"But really, darling, after all," I remember Dyanne's babbling one day. I can still see the way she widened her big, blue eyes in an imploring gesture designed to make strong men topple. She had led Cowhide right up to the horse trough with it, too, but he wasn't drinking. "How will it sound at the altar for me to say, 'I, Dyanne, take thee, Cowhide'?" But, really, I ask you?"

Cowhide had only smiled with the corners of his eyes and refused to comment. Dy forgot her wide, baby stare and shot him a slit-eyed glance, wondering, just as everyone who knows Cowhide has wondered at times, whether he was being taciturn or just plain smart.

Cowhide had his way at the wedding and I've heard it bandied about that the first serious rupture came when Dyanne went to have her calling cards engraved. In all fairness to Dy, I think she had a point. Imagine the impact of the pronouncement, "Mrs. Cowhide Terry," falling from the astringent lips of a proper butler, to a gathering in a Newport drawing room. But there were so many other really fundamental things for which there was no possible compromise that, like most debutante-cowboy marriages, it was doomed to fall to pieces from its inception, and not even the sentimentality nor the half million dollars of an eccentric uncle could put it together again. I knew that. Yet here I was on my way to San Xavier in my sweet little orchid-blue straight jacket to do my bit in the patching job.

I KNEW THE road so well that I remembered it was time to watch for the first brief preview you get of old San Xavier through a break in the rugged, mesquite-covered hills. Suddenly, there it was. As many times as I've seen it, I'm never prepared for the pure white loveliness of its fine old towers, set against the blue-purple Mountain of the Holy Cross and the mauve velvet valley of the Santa Cruz beyond. It was all so peaceful and quiet. Maybe everything might work out all right after all. Who was I to say? Who would think, for instance, that you could wed the Moorish and the Mexican, the Byzantine and the Christian, with now and then a touch of ancient Aztec and produce such a thing of reverent beauty as San Xavier mission?

I parked alongside Lock Trayton's station wagon before the main gate. It was already dusk enough to see the candles burning below the blackened, wax-covered statue of St. Lucy in her niche to the right of the facade. The wedding party was grouped about the main entrance, the Elison twins still holding up Dyanne's train while she fidgeted about in the narrow space like a jaybird with its tail feathers caught in a door. Her eyes seemed dark and immense in a peaked

little face, which in the unflattering light, looked the color of unbaked dough. To my amazement she managed a smile as we came up.

Lock Trayton put out his hand and enclosed mine in a bone-shattering grip. Lock Trayton is unreservedly the handsomest man I've ever met. He is six feet four, muscular and hard as old saddle leather. I know him to be over fifty, though he bears no stamp of age. The two streaks of white over his temples are, rather, marks of distinction. I wondered irrelevantly as I shook his hand whether men like Ronald Colman and Lock Trayton come only in older sizes or whether I'm blind and they are recognizable, say, at twenty-six.

"Hello, Bucky," he said, and while his tone was cheerful enough, something told me his mind wasn't at home.

"How's everything at the ranch?" I asked.

"Fine, fine," he said, but his mind wasn't at the ranch either. In case you don't know, Lock Trayton bosses a two-thousand-acre spread, that is, when he's not running for governor, acting as a rodeo judge, or taking a flier in some mining venture.

Cowhide, who was standing apart from the others, looked completely society broken in his midnight blue formal. If you set a nice bronzed head on a pair of over-sized shoulders (the result of calf roping, not shoulder pads) and add the long, narrow body of a born cowboy, you've got something mighty smooth. That is Cowhide.

I walked over and put a hand on his arm. "Hiyah, Buckaroo," he said and patted my hand. There didn't seem to be much to say. "I guess they're ready to start," I remarked inanely. "God," he breathed, and was off to take his place in the proceedings.

I turned to notice Dy whispering agitatedly to Louella. "Anything wrong?" I asked.

"The orchids," Lou explained. "They're green. Not blue. But I don't think Uncle Charley would mind, do you?"

"The will said 'duplicate the cere-

mony in every particular,'" Dy put in. "Besides, I'm not wearing 'something blue'. I ha—hate green orchids." Suddenly Dy simply let go. Her hands shook so that I took her corsage lest the fragile flowers become crushed. She started to cry, not, I'm certain, from any remorse or sentiment but because her nerves simply had reached the cracking point. She took Lock's proffered handkerchief and dabbed cautiously under her mascaraed lashes, gave Lock a brave smile and said, "Silly of me. Let's go, now."

JUST then the fine old mesquite-wood doors, put together with wooden pegs and hung on hand-wrought hinges, swung outward, exactly as they have for the past century and a half, and Father Saltra stepped out. From the choir loft above us the sweet voices of a Papago Indian choir intoned a simple Ave Maria. Then came the wedding march and the twins, Cora Makeby and I took our places and moved slowly down the narrow aisle.

Antiquity always sobers me and old churches start me thinking about my sins. San Xavier even smells old, not only dank and musty but it has that indefinable odor as of mouldering bones. My rankling thoughts rattled in my brain like the clattering of our high-heeled shoes on the bare, worn boards. In the dimly-lighted stillness, the sad, sweet faces of the primitively-drawn saints, robust in their very crudeness, seemed to take on being. I even imagined I saw the sad-eyed Indian cherubs in the west chapel shake their heads. I wondered as I examined my own thoughts just what Dyanne must be thinking.

And so I reached the altar where Cowhide stood, facing one of the smiling lions, carved out of single pieces of mesquite wood, with human eyes and hands. Dyanne, on Lock's arm, looked lovely in miles of shimmering satin. Too engrossed in numerous recriminations and apprehensions, I was only vaguely conscious of Father Saltra's softly - intoned words and the all-but-inaudible murmurings of Dyanne and Cowhide. I

was so impressed with the beauty and solemnity of the service that for the first time I grasped old Charley Kayne's purpose in making his unusual stipulation.

And then it was all over. All I could think of, however, as I marched slowly down the aisle behind the white slopes of satin, topped by a fine mist of tulle which ended in Dyanne's pearl-studded tiara, was poor little Frances Crandell. The old Mesquite doors swung open, sending the little tongues of flame from the candles licking backwards as it closed again after Cowhide and Dyanne.

Father Saltra, as always, was completely wrapped up in his work with the Papagos, and insisted on showing the rest of us the new organ which the Indian youngsters had bought with their pennies and dimes. Since the Mission's founding in 1697, first the Jesuits and later the Franciscan fathers, aided by the Sisters of Saint Benedict, have nursed and fed, healed and taught the Papagos as well as attended to their spiritual needs. Cora begged off but Lock and the Elison girls and I climbed the dark, narrow steps to the choir loft. There under the tender gaze of the Holy Family, looking down from faded frescoes, stood the shiny, new organ. The old padre ran a work-roughened finger along the dust-free surface lovingly.

"We're teaching the boys and girls the violin . . ." He stopped suddenly. Through the thick old walls had come a muffled crack. As he started to pick up the conversation again, there was another deadened roar. We stood uncomprehending, motionless. Then came another shot. One of the Elison twins, nearest the stairway, started cautiously down the worn, steep steps. I couldn't stand her snail pace. I squeezed by her, vaguely conscious of continuing shots outside in the night. Throwing open the heavy door, I ran out. At first there was only blackness. Blackness and hurrying footsteps and the dim inuendo of rhythmic hoof beats, dying out in the desert stillness.

At long last I saw over in one corner of the east patio a heap of satin,

shimmering blue white in the pale starlight.

Chapter III

THE hurrying footsteps and shadowy figure kneeling at Dy's side belonged to Cowhide.

"Dy!" I screamed.

Cowhide slipped his arm under Dyanne's head. She gave a short sigh, then the hand holding the hated green orchids slipped away from the basque bosom of her wedding dress and hung limp. Where it had clutched her breast, a large red stain appeared and kept spreading.

I stood up and held on to Cowhide's trembling shoulders for support. He was moaning, "Dyanne . . . Dyanne," and trying to tell her something. Shock stretched the instants into hours, tied my laggard impulses to a lodestone. It couldn't have been more than a second later that Lock Trayton came running out of the Mission, anxiety contorting his face, and knelt by Dyanne's lifeless body. The only living sound was the staccato beat of a horse's hoofs. Lock tore himself away and lunged through the gate in the patio and stood, helplessly gazing into the night.

Cowhide was perfectly rigid, staring into Dyanne's lifeless face. "What happened?" I asked softly but he remained completely insensible. I shook his shoulders. "Cowhide!"

Slowly he turned and looked up at me. "What happened?" I repeated.

"I don't know," he said. "We went out to the car. She said, 'Wait here a minute.' I thought she was going back into the Mission. God, oh God . . ."

He was breathing so hard he choked up. "She came here into the patio. It was black. I couldn't see anything except her white gown. Then I heard the shots."

I ran into Cora Makeby and the twins, head on, coming out of the church. The twins took one look and raised their voices in a banshee duet and Cora grasped my arm and silently sank down to the floor at my feet.

"Stop it!" I shouted to the twins. "Stay here with Cora and don't leave

her."

Father Saltra was hurrying toward Dyanne as I ran down the aisle of the Mission and through the sacristy to the right. Somewhere in that general direction, I remembered, was a telephone. I slipped through a side door and groped my way along a black corridor. The thick walls felt cold and the air was dead. Where could there be a safer place, I asked myself, than old San Xavier? Nevertheless, I was afraid. I started to run, stumbled over something and fell headlong. I lay there for a moment on the old, uneven tiles, smarting and terrified. Not a sound broke the stillness, so I put out a cautious hand to see what had tripped me. It felt like a long case of some kind, that of a guitar or violin. That made me feel better. Just like some musically-inclined little Indian to leave his instrument lying around to trip people.

I went more cautiously after that and soon came to a door with a light shining from beneath it. I knocked and one of the Sisters opened the door to a little office. She had heard the shots and was on her way to investigate. She directed me to the telephone, pressed a light switch that flooded the corridor through which I had just come, and left to see if she could help.

I started to call the Pima county sheriff's office. At the sight of the hand that reached for the 'phone, I went weak. The hand was bloody—my hand. Frantically, I thought back. I had not touched anything near Dyanne. Scooping up the skirt of my billowing orchid taffeta, I investigated my smarting knees. They were skinned and beginning to turn purplish but they were not bloody. Neither was the bump on my forehead. The instrument case I had stumbled over—that was the only thing I had touched. I went reeling out into the now-lighted corridor. It was completely, starkly bare. No violin case, nothing.

Backing into the little office, I glanced about for a wash basin. There was none and nothing under the canopy of heaven could have induced me to venture out into other

dark corridors. I wiped my hand on the odious orchid taffeta which I vowed to burn the moment I took it off. Then I called the Sheriff's office.

"Gar-oof," growled a fuzzed-up voice at the other end. Out of all the fine, young deputies under the glistening tiled dome of the Pima county court house, I'd have to get old Lafe Raterlee. Lafe used to be the sheriff up in San Joaquin county where I live, until his sinecure ran out with the murder of P. X. Redline, his benefactor. So now he's a deputy with aspirations in Tucson. The fact that he used to bounce me on his knee twenty years ago doesn't help my prestige with him.

"Lafe," I said, "this is Bucky Johnson," and didn't get any further.

"I knew it. Every time I have a run of luck you have to call up. Now, looky here, my pretty little bird-brained buckaroo, you can just set and yell bloody murder till hell runs dry. I ain't havin' any, see?"

"Lafe Raterlee, I . . ."

"Raise you three."

"I'm out at San Xavier mission and there's been . . ."

"The hell you say. I fade."

"Lafe Raterlee," I screamed, remembered where I was and took off some pressure. "Lafe, Dyanne Kayne has just been shot at her wedding."

"Well, now, you don't say," he drawled. I could hear the flap of cards on a table. "So they're still havin' shotgun weddin's, are they? Good old custom, I always says."

I ground my teeth. "Well, so long, Lafe. I just thought I'd tip you off before I called your boss. Lock Trayton will be glad to learn of your interest."

THAT FINALLY got him and he listened. Briefly, I told him what little I knew. "Hold on just a minute, Bucky." I heard him say, "Beak, lock up Gus here. And remember, you owe me two bucks." To me, he said, "Beak Dodsens and I'll be right out. Looks like a case fer the hounds. I'll fetch 'em."

Lafe is inordinately proud of a couple of dyspeptic bloodhounds which once caught a vagrant break-

ing into the San Joaquin jail. "Never mind the hounds," I told him, but I knew he would.

After trying unsuccessfully to get Hank, I slipped cautiously back through the shadowy corridor and into the nave of the old church. It was dimly lighted and something about the serenity and peacefulness of the place made me continue to tip-toe apologetically. I had gone almost the length of the narrow center aisle before I noticed, with a start the shadowy figure of Louella Regan, sitting on the last pew, gazing straight ahead as though transfixed. I must have startled her for she jerked her head around, and if her look mirrored her thoughts, she was terrified.

Cora, I noted with relief, was sitting in a chair in the entryway. She assured me she was all right. As I stepped outside, Lock Trayton was just coming through the patio gate, his hands doubled into two enormous fists and his eyebrows drawn tightly together, bringing the fine character lines of his face into sharp focus. We all knew the complete frustration of helplessness in the moments that followed, deathly silent except for the soft murmuring of Father Saltra and the Sisters as they hovered over Dyanne's body. Thank God for them, I thought.

The 'dobses of the Papagos were dark and silent, although the shots had attracted a few of them. They stood in the shadows, quiet, murky figures fading into the dark. Getting a flashlight from my car, I worked my way around the ornamental cacti which hug the patio wall, to examine the caliche, the cement-like gravel that we call soil around Tucson. There were a few hoofprints but since the Papagos use horses, they were as discriminating—to me, at least—as children's footprints on a playground. I ran the beam of light over the white-washed wall of sun-baked brick which is topped by a band of eyelet insertion in stone—rows of egg-shaped openings a little larger than a man's head. The wall furnished a perfect parapet to shield a murderer standing in the darkness and the openings were the correct

height for resting a gun for careful aim.

Somewhere in the tangle of mesquite thickets, greasewood and cacti, written in the loose sand and caliche of the broad Santa Cruz valley and safe now under a blanket of moonless night, lay the secret of Dyanne's murder. The only person I could think of who could possibly decipher it, and he, not till daytime, was old 'Pache, prospector, Indian scout and genius of all tasks at our ranch. 'Pache could track a steer on the hoof all the way from the Tres Santos on the Mexican border to the steak on your dinner plate in Kansas City. 'Pache had come with me to attend the rodeo but the question was how to locate him by sunrise, what with all the poker games and divers lures held out to revelers at rodeo time.

A car was tearing down the quiet, deserted road to the Mission. It came to a stop with a screeching of rubber and out climbed Lafe Raterlee, four mournful, baying hounds and two deputy sheriffs. Lafe isn't really an old man. Fifty, perhaps. It's just the way he walks that makes him seem to totter. He gives the impression of being strung together like those toys made of wooden beads that will wag their tails or collapse completely when you relax the cord, except that Lafe manages to retain a faltering hold on the cord himself. He wears his baggy trousers roomy enough for a pot belly which isn't there and supports them precariously by a pair of suspenders which long since have reached the limit of elasticity, thereby lowering his trouser's waistline to a point a good two inches below the last button on his checkered shirt.

It was too dark to see Lafe's get-up but it hasn't varied in the twenty-five years I've known him. Neither, for that matter, has his long, lax mouth, thatched by scraggly, tobacco-stained whiskers, nor his blue, fishy eyes set far out on the corners of a lantern skull.

"Halt," boomed Lafe importantly, as I walked out of the darkness.

"Hello, Lafe," I said.

"Well, fan my flanks, if it ain't Bucky Johnson. Always hornin' in

on my murders."

EVER SINCE they pinned my brother Bill's deputy sheriff's badge on me down in San Joaquin county, when he joined the Navy, Lafe has been burning. The newspapers played up the "girl sheriff" angle, because it gave them some legs to print, and Lafe, who's never had his picture in the papers, reckoned Law and Order was coming to a pretty sorry state. Not that anyone expected me to play deputy seriously. It was just like being named a Kentucky colonel.

"I'm not hornin' in. I was dragged here, believe me. But now that everything is in your hands, I'll be running along."

"Not so fast." Lafe shoved up a couple of steps closer and bent an authoritative gaze on me. "Jest what's goin' on around here?"

I told him again, this time in greater detail, what little I could, omitting only the part about the violin case in the corridor because I knew he would put it down to the hallucinations of a hysterical woman. And if there is anything I'm not, it's hysterical. Imaginative, maybe, but definitely not hysterical. Lock Trayton walked up just then and Lafe instantly turned on the charm and oiled his slimy tongue. It's a significant fact that I'm not a voter in Pima county.

While he talked to Lock I slipped away, went back to the telephone and finally located Hank. I knew I wouldn't dare return to town unless he had been first to get word of the story. We made a tentative date for around ten at the Frontier hotel. This time, when I joined the others another carload of officials had arrived including the photographer and coroner. There was a big light focused on Dyanne's sheet-covered body and Lafe was talking to Louella Regan.

"I know it's a plumb terrible shock to you, Miss Regan, and I hate to ask you but I've asked everyone else and nobody has ever seen it." But Louella hung back in the darkness just beyond the circle of light. Lafe spotted me. "C'mere, Bucky, there's somethin' in Miss Kayne's hand.

Looks like a gold nugget of some kind."

I knew nothing of a gold nugget and I just stood there, bound by dread, until Lock said kindly, "Please, I think it's important." I walked up and took Louella's hand. It was cold and shaking and slippery with perspiration.

Lafe knelt down and tossed back the sheet to show Dyanne's small right hand. Something shiny reflected the floodlight briefly from between the fingers. Lafe stuck out a horny forefinger and gently unclenched the fist. I caught a glimpse of a peculiarly-shaped lump of dull gold before I heard Louella draw in her breath. Had it not been for Lock Trayton's supporting arm, I think she would have dropped to the ground. But her eyes, wild with some unreasoning fear, fixed on those cupped fingers, blue-white and ghastly in the artificial light, and the shiny object they held. Finally, Lock led her away like one hypnotized.

"What do you make of it?" Lafe's drawl brought her back with a snap.

"I—I don't know. It's impossible. I mean I must be mistaken." Then with a slight jerk of her head as though throwing off her disbelief, she added, "It looks exactly like Uncle Charley's Golden Burro."

Lafe scratched his head. I explained, "Uncle Charley Kayne was Dy's rich uncle. This wedding business was all his idea—his will, that is."

"Oh, sure, sure. I recollect. Committed suicide and they jest declared 'im legally dead t'other day. Must've given Miss Dyanne this before he kicked off. Did she carry it at her original wedding?" Lafe looked first at me, then at Louella. Louella, wide-eyed and trembling, shook her head.

Lafe waved to the waiting photographer to get busy and we moved away. "Wa-al, I reckon she must've decided to carry it for a good luck piece, then, eh, Miss Regan?"

Louella was silent a moment and when she spoke her voice sounded far off. "No, she couldn't have. Because Uncle Charley never let his Lucky Burro, as he called it, out of his pos-

session. He was wearing it when he jumped into the East river."

Chapter IV

SINCE before Tucson was big enough to sport anything resembling a hotel, the site of the Frontier has been a renowned camping ground. About the time Boston was having her famous tea party, Tucson was getting a wall around its scared little Mexican garrison to keep out the Apaches, and not so long afterwards, Tio Miguel's corral, which is now the parking lot for the Frontier, was famous from San Antone to 'Frisco for its Tucson beds—you lay on your stomach and covered it up with your back. It was almost a hundred years ago that Tucson became U. S. territory and Tio's grandson got permission to knock out a portion of the wall so the customers of his newly-built hotel wouldn't have to go a half mile out of their way through the only city gate.

The old place has been renovated a good many times but the economical Spanish architecture remains. From the outside it still looks a good deal as it did to travelers on the Overland stage during the gold rush. It is low and flat and sprawling, with glistening white stucco over its two-foot thick adobe walls, and not even the formidable progress of a modern city with its street-widening mania, has stripped it of the narrow porch across the front, flush with the sidewalk, with sturdy oak chairs that tilt back to a crazy angle and a rickety wooden railing just the right height for foot resting and tobacco spitting.

I pulled up in the parking lot and took Louella in the back way, past the kitchens and up the service elevator, to avoid a crowded lobby. Lou turned the key in the lock with a steady hand, then hesitated and looked at me.

"Come in for a minute, won't you, Kay?"

"Sure, Lou." For nearly ten years she had been going in to face Dyanne, petulant, condescending, and every time she had hated it. Now she would never face Dyanne again. It

was a relief, she could live her own life, but still, it was murder. She pushed the thick, old door open and flicked on the light switch. The bulbs were the old variety and gave off a wan, yellow glow. In the eerie light, Lou looked ghastly. On the far side, a door opened on a bath which connected with Dy's room.

Lou accepted my invitation to spend the night in my room and while she was getting her things together I started on, anxious to get out of the orchid taffeta, now more odious than ever. In the hall, just outside of the door, I ran smack into Frances Crandell.

Frances is tall and slender and as neatly limber as a rawhide whip. She wore a soft grey wool suit, a high-crown red sailor and a winter sun tan hat a Boston deb would have given a dozen sun lamps for. Being a champion fancy rider doesn't exactly hurt your figure and it needn't detract from your charm and poise unless you let it. Frances didn't.

"Hello, Bucky. Warm, isn't it?" She flashed me a smile but I had caught a glimpse of her face before she saw me and noticed a quick refocusing of her eyes as she disengaged her far-off thoughts.

"Hello, Francie. I suppose you've heard the news?"

She shot me a pseudo-questioning glance, then gave a short sigh. She said simply, "Yes."

For once I couldn't think of anything to say. So I muttered something about hanging and was just starting to break it up when a beer-parlor voice floated out from behind a closed door, traveled down a hall, turned the corner and reached us half way down another corridor without losing an overtone. It said, "Frances! Where the devil are you going?"

The words were followed by the opening of a door and footsteps which made the ancient timbers of the old floor vibrate. I noticed twin spots of red high on Francie's cheeks. Rory Crandell came charging around the corner of the hall but brought up quickly, like a steeplechase horse before too formidable a hurdle. In the

instant before she saw me, I caught the identical look that had been in her daughter's eyes and I marveled again, as I had for the many years I had known them, that Frances could be such a perfect replica of her mother in over-all appearance and yet so completely different every other way.

AURORA Crandell stared at me belligerently, out of fiery, rather prominent black eyes. Frances has black eyes, too, but they never appear prominent, probably because she never stares. Rory tucked in a spear of straight black hair but it came right back out, stood out like a horn for an instant, then dropped back in place again over one eye. It seemed to soften the stare somewhat.

"Hello, Rory," I said. "Francie and I were just talking about the murder."

She didn't return my greeting. She just looked at me another instant, then boomed, "What murder?"

"Why, Dyanne Kayne's, of course. Hadn't you heard?"

Her glance darted to Frances, then back to me. I had the feeling that something passed between them. "When? I thought she was gettin' reharnessed tonight."

"She was shot immediately after the ceremony, outside the Mission entrance."

Frances patted my arm and moved toward the stairs. "'Bye, now, Bucky."

"Fanny, where're you goin'?"

"To the—post office," Francie replied briefly and was gone.

When I turned back to Rory Crandell a change had come over her. "Well, tell me all about the murder. Just what the hussy deserved, if you ask me. Come on into my cor-rell and let's celebrate."

I always feel as though I were talking over a public address system to a capacity unseen audience when I talk to Rory, so, no means of escape coming to me at the moment, I chose the next best recourse, the comparative privacy of her room. She handed me a half-filled bottle of gin. I grinned. "I just can't take it, Rory." She could and did.

"So little Miss Prissy Pants got herself shot, did she? What I want to know is who to pin the medal on."

"I don't know who did it. It was dark and whoever it was got away on horseback. Into the desert. Lafe Raterlee has his hounds on the trail now."

"Well, God love me, you don't say. That calls for another." Rory took a sip, aired her tongue, then did a turn about the room. Oblong and angular, where her daughter is slender and neatly streamlined, Rory walked awkwardly, her balance changing with every step. She stopped, dropped down in a chair and suddenly went serious on me.

"All that money," she said, "and what'd it get 'er? Sins of the fathers, that's what it was. Well, they won't be no second generation for 'em to be visited on. Stew Kayne was a gay old dog in his day. A gentleman, though. I knew 'im way back when, and I coulda married 'im, too. And then my daughter, instead of Dyanne, coulda had all that dough."

"And maybe Frances would have been murdered instead of Dyanne," I reminded her.

Rory Crandell sucked in her breath. "No, she wouldn't. Not my Fanny. She's a good, sweet girl. She'd done right by everybody and wouldn't had no enemies."

"Francie's a saint, Rory," I told her. "And you can be mighty proud of her. I hope she falls in love and marries the right man and has all the happiness she deserves."

"If you are referrin' to that yellow-bellied Cowhide Terry," she snorted, "hangin's too good for 'im. The two-timin' skunk. Like I told Hi Blodgett at the round-up tonight, anybody'd go messin' around outside his own cor-rell deserves to spend the rest of his life with a hell cat."

"Didn't you ever make a mistake, Rory? A really bad one?"

RORY SLUMPED farther down in her chair and two long, weatherbeaten, work-marred hands pawed nervously at the gay cretonne slip covers. I had always thought of Rory Crandell as a perfect goon who

had miraculously given birth to a lovely, beautiful person. Now for the first time I saw the miracle. Rory had made Frances, built her out of her own broken dreams and longings and a lifetime of hardships, then sent her off to the best of finishing schools for the final polish.

"Hi Blodgett," Rory said finally, "says this year's rodee-o ain't the same without Cowhide's ropin'. I always gives the devil 'is due. They ain't no better calf roper in the business than Cowhide."

We talked a while about the rodeo and about Cowhide's famous cow pony dying, forcing him to give up riding the circuit until he could buy and train another, and I finally managed to get away.

This time I marched straight to my room, determined that nothing nor nobody could stop me before I got out of that orchid taffeta and under the shower. Pancho, my black cat who's so big he looks like a sleek young panther, proffered a paw, his way of begging for a handout. Pancho, short for Don Francisco Maria Cortez y Johnson, always travels with me, scaring unsuspecting dogs half to death by spitting at them from the car window, and upsetting hotel clerks when they learn from the maid there's a monster prowling my room. I had just finished feeding him when the telephone rang. It was Hank and I could practically hear him stamping his feet. "I'm on my way," I told him. In exactly three minutes I had pulled on a light wool cowboy shirt and a flannel skirt, and knotted a bright red-and-green scarf around my neck—standard costume for all natives at rodeo time. I combed my hair and dabbed on some lipstick going down on the elevator.

I stepped out in time to see Hank's face light up appreciatively as a curvaceous redhead walked by pretending not to see him.

"Hello, my fickle friend," I said. "How do you prefer your blondes tonight, strawberry or medium?"

Hank grinned and put on his baby face. He can take a child away from its mother with it, fell a debutante or make an old lady act like a high

school girl getting her first kiss. I always fall flat on my face, too, darn it.

We fought our way through the swarming crowds of gaudy-costumed citizenry and winter visitors and almost got killed by wildly-careening vehicles. Congress street was festooned with miles of streamers bearing the superfluous information that La Fiesta de los Vagueros—the rodeo—was in full swing. We got hit in the eyes with wide-brimmed sombreros, sideswiped by sleeping babies swinging in rebosas slung over the backs of fat Papago Indian women, and came face to face with a gayly-caparisoned horse in the middle of the sidewalk as we turned down Scott street toward the post office.

It was comparatively quiet inside the federal building. In fact, it looked almost normal with old Teddy Beethoven at the high black counter, writing his nightly post card to the President, calling his personal attention to the ills of Tucson and the universe in general. Teddy's real name is Theodore R. (for Roosevelt) Beytower but because he is never without his old violin case and plays classic melodies with the dexterity of a concert master, everybody calls him Teddy Beethoven.

Hank, who knows everybody in town and calls them by their first names, said, "Hiya, Teddy."

Beethoven turned around slowly on arthritic joints, looked myopically at us from rheumy black eyes, half covered sheep-dog fashion by bushy, white brows. His voice sounded as though it were coming from the middle of a haystack, muffled as it was by an impenetrable thicket of beard, shading from bright yellow above and below his mouth to pure white in front of his ears. You could hardly see his face at all.

"Good evening, Mr. Noyes," he said. "Taking good care of the Bulletin as usual?"

"Sure am. And I suppose you're taking good care of the White House?"

"Yes, son. Tonight I wrote the President about the scandalous river of liquor that flows from the bars

and eating houses of this great city. Take the grain, I implored him, and send it to starving humanity. Of course, the President's a good Baptist and I know it isn't his fault. Get after those nincompoops that we send up there to make the laws, I told him."

Hank put his letters in the slot and we left old Teddy with his woes and fought our way through the crowded streets to the comparative quiet of the newspaper office. After unburdening myself of every little detail of Dyanne's death, I simply folded up. Hank practically led me back to the Frontier and I stumbled up to my room.

I was surprised to find the light on and Louella wide awake and curled up in robe and slippers in a big chair. Pancho, all twenty pounds of him, was in her lap, purring lustily. He looked up at me with love sick eyes.

"I couldn't bear to turn out the lights," Lou said. "But I'm dead. Simply dead."

SHE GOT up, putting Pancho in her chair, and went over to her make-up case on the dresser. "Oh, darn. I forgot my toothbrush. I—I'll have to go back to our—to my bathroom and get it." Dread highlighted her eyes.

"You'll do no such thing," I told her. "I'm dressed. I'll get it." She gave me a key and I went down the now-quiet hall with Pancho trailing after me, like a puppy out for an airing. I unlocked the door and pressed the light switch but nothing happened. Leaving the hall door wide for the benefit of the dim light it let in, I made my way cautiously over to a floor lamp.

Just as I was in the act of pulling the chain on the old-fashioned fixture, I thought I heard a noise. Standing perfectly still, I tried to penetrate with my eyes the murkiness of the big, old room. I always listen so hard when I go into strange, dark rooms that my sharpened senses pick up sounds a block away, so I charged off my alarm to my over-zealous precautionary system and pulled the light on.

In the weak, yellow glow, an old

rocking chair became a monster on the wall and everything took on ghostly shapes. Woman-like, I looked under the bed, and then I noticed Pancho sitting with tail twitching and ears flattened. He was fixed on the closed door of the bathroom that connected with Dy's room. I stopped, suddenly terrified, all of the uneasiness that I had felt that evening surging up into panic.

First, I checked with the hall door to make sure it was wide open—if I had to scream I wanted someone to hear me—and then I slipped out of my shoes. Tiptoeing to the bathroom door, I put my head against it to listen and just as I leaned over, a dry, loose floorboard beneath me creaked, sending Pancho two feet into the air.

Again, I put my head to the door and this time there was no question about it. There was a noise, only it was coming from the room beyond, not the bathroom, and it very obviously was being made by someone ransacking the place. Gingerly, I turned the knob and eased the door open. A flicker of light showed from under the door to Dy's room. Tugging at my taut, unwilling muscles, I tiptoed noiselessly over the icy, tile floor.

Holding my breath, I bent down to the keyhole but unfortunately, it wasn't aimed right. As I paused, uncertain of the next move, I realized suddenly, for no reason at all, that in the mental picture I had instinctively formed of the ransacking of the dead girl's room, the intruder was a woman. I tried to analyze my conceptions but the more I attempted to throw out the woman, the more stubbornly she stuck.

At that point in my ruminations, the shower curtain suddenly lunged out at me. Panic swept common sense out of my body, leaving it standing there helplessly. The curtain swung back with a peculiar, rustling noise. Then followed a heavy thud. I went charging out of the bathroom into the light but before I had gotten very far my reasoning returned and yanked up my panic short. Even before I saw Pancho walking sheepishly toward me, I realized that he had si-

ently followed me into the bathroom, made a clumsy and unsuccessful try at climbing the shower curtain and had fallen into the tub. I also realized that between the two of us, we had quite effectively scared off the intruder. The fact that I could now go into Dy's room with reasonable safety brought me little consolation.

Limp but resolute, I started for the connecting bath once more. Summoning my courage, I cautiously tried the door to Dy's room, found it open and poked my head in. The place seemed completely static, the way an unpeopled room should. The light was still on.

I could only gape, at first, at the wreckage. The dresser drawers had been pulled out and the contents dumped on the floor. Dyanne's suitcases were open and her trunk had been turned upside down. The bed had been stripped of its covers and the mattress was askew. Trying the hall door, I found it unlocked and the hallway empty.

ON THE dressing table lay a small leather case from which the fragile lock had been crudely torn. Business papers were spilled in confusion about it. Dropping down on the dressing table stool I started to rifle through them hurriedly. Suddenly I was conscious of eyes upon me. The whole fright of the last few minutes welled up in me again, speeding my heart to the bursting point. My throat was as dry as an arroyo in August. Looking into the mirror, out of the corners of my eyes, I searched over the room. A closet door was slightly ajar, enough for eyes in the blackness to watch my every movement. As I stared, the door slowly opened.

Aurora Crandell stepped out.

"Mighta knowed it'd be you," she said disgustedly. She laughed but nevertheless looked like a sheep dog aught trying to steal a ham from the dinner table.

"Rory," I said, studying her and frankly puzzled, "what on earth are you doing here?"

"Might ask you that same question," she countered. "But since you

asked first, I'll give you a straight answer. I was comin' down the hall when I heard someone in here. I thought it was that aunt of Dy's, of course, and knocked on the door and called to her. Right away it got awful quiet an' I figgered someone was up to no good. The killer comin' back like they do in the movies. Not that I wanted to catch 'im and turn 'im in, you understand. I just had a hanker-in' to congratulate 'im.

"Well, I come in here and there ain't no one around and then I hear a commotion in the bathroom, so I hid in this closet. Now, smarty pants, what in the hell are you doin' here?"

I explained and we talked things over for ten or fifteen minutes. Rory said she hadn't seen anyone in the hall at all, and she figured that when she had come into the room, the prowler had hid somewhere, and then when she had taken refuge in the closet, the intruder had escaped.

Picking up Pancho, I trudged heavily down to my room. I made up my mind I wouldn't say anything to Louella. She was waiting for me.

"I was getting worried," she said. "Did you have trouble finding it?"

"Didn't even hunt for it," I said. "People are always cleaning their teeth. Rubbing the enamel right off of them. Personally, I think the toothbrush manufacturers are in cahoots with the dentists."

She looked at me as though to say, "Good heavens, they'll be around for you with a big net."

But she didn't question me. She didn't ask me where I had been or what I had been doing, and it struck me as strange. No stranger, though, than Rory's explanation of her presence in Dy's clothes closet.

Chapter V

ONE OF the biggest disadvantages of living on a ranch all of your life is the habit of getting up at five a.m. No matter where I am or how late the party lasts, I awake like a tired old cow pony and go stumbling around in the dark for coffee.

So at five the next morning, unable to sleep, I dressed and went down to

the hotel kitchens, and since I couldn't find anything smaller than a five-gallon coffee pot, brewed me some in a sauce pan. I poured out a cup of the thick, black stuff and groped my way to the patio with the hope of combing the fuzziness out of my brain.

I had been sitting there in the quiet, pre-dawn grayness some moments before I was conscious of the odor of cigarette smoke. All I could see was a tiny red glow now and then. Momentarily startled, I called, "Hello?" No answer. No more glow. "Who's there?" I pushed my chair back, ready for a quick retreat.

"Bucky?" Relief flooded in. I recognized Cowhide's drawl.

"Thank heaven, it's you," I breathed. "Want some coffee?" He did and we went into the old kitchen. After finishing the saucepan brew, we sat there on the high stools, deep in our thoughts. Cowhide's eyes looked the way eyes do when you sit up all night and chain smoke. His top hair, bleached white by the sun, stood up in ragged strands like so much straw and he ran a large, awkward paw through it as though to demonstrate how it had gotten into its present state.

Finally I said, "Why, Cowhide? Why was she shot? And why, why on earth did you go back to her?"

Cowhide moaned. "It's all my fault. Oh, God, why did I ever have to cross trails with that woman? I know I've been the biggest fool west of the Pecos and I'm not asking for sympathy."

His words choked in his throat. "They all hate me and I don't blame them. I hate myself. Dy hated me and Francie hates me and her mother loathes me. Oh, God."

He put his head between his knees and covered his face with his hands. "I'm not much of a talker," he mumbled awkwardly, "but I'll go plumb loco if I don't unload. I want you to promise, though, you won't tell Francie."

After a moment's hesitation, he went on. "I don't know who shot Dy or why. Fact is, there's no use pretending I care. I just wanted you to

know I didn't have anything to do with this reconciliation business."

"And that is what I'm not to tell Francie? Oh, help!" I have strictly no use for false pride. "For the love of Geronimo, if you don't tell her, who will? Did you ever think of Francie and her side of it?"

"I don't think of anything else but Francie. Haven't ever since—since the last hundred years. She won't listen to me."

"Nuts, son, she'll listen. In the meantime, I'm listening."

"Dy had me roped and tied. She wouldn't give me a divorce and she wouldn't get one. I think she had an inkling of her uncle's will all along. Every time I'd threaten to go to Reno, she'd vow she'd file a counter suit and name Francie. She wouldn't have stopped at anything. So when old Charley died and this reconciliation business came up, I refused flatly to go through with it. She raised happy hell. She even offered to buy me off, to show you how desperate she was."

"Bucky, the only reason I went through with that ceremony last night was because she promised me if I did she'd give me my freedom."

"And you believed her?"

"I think she intended to, yes. God knows, she didn't want me. She had another sucker lined up."

"Who?" I asked eagerly.

He hesitated a second, then said huskily. "I don't know." If he didn't want to tell me, I wasn't going to press him just then.

I shook my head. "We might as well face it, Cowhide. I believe you, knowing Dy as I did. But I don't think Lafayette P. Raterlee will. He's suspicious of his poor old mother."

"Oh, sure," Cowhide agreed. "He thinks I shot her for her money. Everyone thinks I went back to her for a big slice. Well, to hell with them. I don't care what they think. But just to keep the record straight, I insisted on signing a statement relinquishing all claim to any part of her fortune for all time."

"You did? What did you do with it?"

"I gave it to Dy. Should be with her things."

And with that Cowhide crawled into his hole, tarantula like, and spun a web of stoical silence over the opening to keep out intruders. I had plenty to keep me busy until time for the rodeo parade, so I returned to my room.

Some time later, Hank 'phoned. "Lafe Raterlee's hounds caught the skunk," he said.

"No!" I gasped. From their past record, I had no faith whatsoever in Lafe's pooches. "You mean they actually tracked him down? Who, Hank?"

"Back up, Bucky. I said they caught the skunk. You know, the little black and white kitties with the smell."

"All right, Hank, I'm listening," I said as coldly as I could.

"Well, the hounds dashed off last night, noses to the ground in a burst of unprecedented efficiency. They wound up a couple of hours later in a mesquite thicket face to face with a skunk. Seems they were indiscreet."

I LAUGHED and it gave my morbid thoughts a good housecleaning.

"The dogs are in a canine beauty parlor getting the works," Hank continued, "and the Sheriff is holding himself incommunicado in the Cosmopolitan Turkish bath house. Otherwise, no developments."

I asked him if he had found 'Pache. "Yes, broke him up just when he had a full house and was about to strike gold. He said you were always ruining his good runs with your blasted murders."

'Pache joined me at breakfast. He took off his ten-gallon hat and blew a cloud of dust off of it over my food, just as they do in the movies. Then he fanned his red, freckled face. It was a gol-derned hot day, particularly in the desert, he announced gruffly, but the mica glint in his eyes gave him away. This little tracking job, I knew, had carried him back to the old days when he and General John J. Pershing were trailing Geronimo's Apaches. To hear 'Pache tell it, of course, he himself rounded up Geronimo and his tomahawkers almost single handed.

Like most Injun fighters, 'Pache

thinks the only good Indian is a dead one. But while he's tetch'd on Indians, he thinks as straight as he shoots when it comes to most things.

Now he blurted out, "That gol-derned trail. It jest up and ended. Picked it up at the patio wall there at the Mission easy 'nough. They was hoof prints where a nag'd been standin' fer quite a spell, so I figgered that was my hoss. Didn't have to go fer till I was purty sure of it."

"How do you mean?"

"'Cause the cayuse I was follerin' was goin' at a dead run. Headed through them mesquite thickets in the river bottoms. Warn't hard to trail till he took to higher ground. Then all of a sudden he jest up and vanished."

I tried not to show the disappointment I felt. I had counted heavily on 'Pache turning up some clue. "And you couldn't pick it up again?"

'Pache gave me a dirty look. "Course I couldn't pick it up 'cause there warn't no more trail. I tell you there jest ain't no trail I can't pick up—if it's there."

I shook my head. "But horses and riders don't disappear into thin air, at least not since Ichabod Crane's time."

"Whose time?"

"What sort of place was it where the trail ended?" I asked, ignoring his puzzlement.

"Jest hard rock desert, caliche, cactus now and agin."

"No road?"

"They was a road, paved road, in fact, a couple hundred yards away. But a cayuse cain't jump that fer."

"'Pache, can you put pads on a horse's feet so he won't make hoof prints?"

"Never seed it done 'ceptin' in the movies. And if they's any such tricks as'll fool 'Pache Adams, I ain't never scalped an Injun."

Finished with breakfast, we left for the Bulletin building to join Hank on the long, low balcony which faces Stone avenue. Below us a restless sea of ten-gallon hats surged against the roped off curb. 'Pache's little gimlet eyes darted over the crowd, up and down the street, nervously, and his

jaws worked. Every once in a while he'd slap his hat on the rail and mutter, "I'll be gol-derned."

The sudden agitation of the crowd hinted at the approach of the belated parade even before the first far-off blasts of the American Legion drum and bugle corps announced its official start. Lock Trayton, grand marshal of the rodeo, led the procession as always, mounted on a magnificent black horse. Behind him marched the drum and bugle corps, their soft blue uniforms moving as one and chromium helmets reflecting the mid-morning sun like a floating carpet of mirrors. Then came tired school children, herded by much wearier school teachers, school bands clashing furiously with each other, rodeo entrants, and every conceivable thing that could be wheeled, ridden, dragged or walked down the street. And before them all danced the ever-present, gay little heat waves which spring eternally from our sun-baked pavements.

We all cheered lustily as Frances Crandell rode by. She wore a charro outfit, which is a Mexican horseman's fancy dress, in powder blue, embroidered in silver, with a shimmering white satin blouse and a white, high-peaked Mexican sombrero, the brim of which was edged in black embroidery and jewels. The wide scarlet sash showed she had the tiniest waist in Arizona, the tight-fitting trousers disclosed long, shapely legs and no spread across the seat. Her black hair fell in a soft roll over the shoulders of her pert little matching blue bolero. And her honey-beige palomino looked about as smart as she in his silver trappings.

I LOOKED at 'Pache to see how he was taking such a big dose of feminine finery but he hadn't even seen Francie. He was looking at a group of half-naked, Apache devil dancers carrying weird black shields and wooden knives.

"What's the matter, 'Pache?" Hank said. "Your trigger finger itchy?"

"Gol-derned Injuns. Oughten be allowed off the reservation." He looked around for a place to spit.

Farther along in the procession, on a tired-looking horse, rode Cowhide Terry, dressed inelegantly in a pink shirt and baggy, suspended trousers, his rodeo clown outfit. He was far from the dashing figure he had cut in last year's rodeo when he was well on his way toward becoming the world champion cowboy. Gone now were his fine pinto roping pony, his silver trappings and even his hand-tooled saddle.

The parade kept petering out to uncostumed entrants and 4-H clubs until finally there was nothing left but small boys and stray dogs. Hank had to go back to work and I was just leaving the Bulletin building when I bumped into Teddy Beethoven. He acted surprised, yet I had a strong feeling he'd had me spotted for some time.

"Good afternoon, Miss Bucky," he said, falling into step with me and feeding me a line of pleasantries which might as well have been a lead rope around my neck. I was flabbergasted when rather bashfully and abruptly, as though if he didn't hurry his courage would be used up, he asked me to have lunch with him. The urgency of his manner, as though he had something terribly important to confide in me, prompted me to accept.

"Sure," I said, "if you'll let me call you Teddy."

He grinned happily and I took his arm which felt skinny through a heavy, ridiculous brown coat. The coat fell almost to his knees and had velvet lapels, now shiny, and one remaining button on the rear waistline where the coat tails started.

I don't know what I was expecting from Mr. Theodore R. Beytower in the way of eateries but certainly not the Ortega House. The Ortega is near the Courthouse, very exclusive and very expensive. Everything about it is authentic, from the eighty-year-old baked mud walls, three feet thick, to the ancient copper kettles.

Teddy whispered something to the handsome Mexican girl in a gay peasant costume and she took us to a table in a little alcove in the far corner of the room. I ordered guacamole—avocado, Mexican style. Teddy, out

of respect for his aged stomach, asked for roast beef. After ordering, we fell into the doldrums of some rather dull conversation. All the time I kept wondering what this small talk was leading up to but afterwards I realized he had elicited from me a pretty clear picture of my views on morality, the late Franklin D. Roosevelt, alcohol and religion. When the food arrived, we were talking about old Tucson.

"You must know a lot of interesting tales about the Old Pueblo, Teddy," I probed.

Teddy shook his head. "Not much, Miss Bucky. I'm not a native of these parts. All I know is what the old timers tell me. But speaking of tales, do you know the story of the Wishing Shrine?"

The Wishing Shrine is one of the most paradoxical landmarks around Tucson. By night it is a romantic retreat in the old part of town, lighted eternally by the flickering glow of many candles, a place of mystery and magic and tradition. By day it is just a brown wall around some candlelabra on a rather seamy street.

"I've heard," I told him, "that a young Mexican was killed there in the '80's and that devout pioneer women began burning votive candles for the salvation of his soul."

Teddy nodded. "Juan Oliveras, they say his name was. The wages of sin is death, Miss Bucky," he said soberly, "and Juan Oliveras broke the sixth commandment. One day Juan looked with lust on his wife's mother."

I shot Teddy a quick glance to see if he were playing it straight. With his thatch of beard, it was like talking to a pair of eyes looking out of a mask. They had the self-hypnotized look of an oracle and his voice gathered new timbre as he talked.

"The father came home and caught his wife and Juan in their guilty passion. The father drove Juan out of his house and killed him. It was a Mexican custom of the day to bury one who had died by violence on the spot where he fell. A devout neighbor kept a candle lighted on Juan's grave, in prayer for his soul. The light, so

they say, has never gone out."

WELL, I said to myself, that's certainly a new angle on the old mother-in-law gag. And to Teddy I said, "That's a rather sordid tale, isn't it? How did it ever come to be a Wishing Shrine?"

"I don't know. I suppose the women got to saying prayers for themselves now and then, when they came to pray for Juan, and they were answered. And probably the young sceptics got to lighting candles and making wishes instead of saying prayers."

He kept his eyes on his roast beef. "You'd be surprised, Miss Bucky, at the folks you see down there at the Shrine. People you wouldn't think were sentimental at all." He raised his eyes and the corners were crinkled up in a disarming smile. "Who'd you guess I saw down there last night?"

I shook my head. "Lock Trayton," he said. "Do you think, Miss Bucky, he was burning a candle for Miss Dyanne, seeing as how she died a violent death?"

The first thing I knew he was scraping his chair back from the table, a startled look in his eyes. With one gesture, he swept up his sweat-streaked, battered felt hat and his old violin case, and before I could say anything he was gone through the kitchen door.

I almost choked on a tortilla. I had a strong impulse to follow him but a society dowager paused in the middle of her *sopa de garbonza* to peer at me through her lorgnette. I decided to finish my *guacamole*, have some black coffee, pay the check surreptitiously and leave just as though I had planned it that way. At that moment the waitress came to tell me in Spanish that the gentleman begged me to forgive him, that everything was taken care of and would I now have my *cafe con leche*. I told her I'd have my *cafe* without the scummy boiled milk and she looked disappointed.

As she moved away, I was surprised to see Lock Trayton accompanied by Louella Regan and Pinto

Jones making for my table. Surprised, that is, to see Pinto. Pinto is Dyanne Kayne's adopted brother. He runs some fancy stables near Tucson where he breeds and trains rodeo horses. Since the day I met him when I was in college, Peter, as he was called then, has always been to me a man of mystery and fascination. He had all of us sorority girls fighting over him because he was an "older man", rugged looking, uninhibited and slightly dangerous, and had been every place and seen everything. Dy's vicious little remarks that he had been picked up by her parents as a waif, that he was no good and really had no name, had only served to make up his stock. He never had pretended he was any good and that had made him O. K. with us girls.

"Well, Pinto," I said. "I thought you were in the East."

"Hiyah, Bucky. How's the world's most beautiful sheriff? I just got in on the Cochise Limited." He sobered. "Nasty shock, hearing about Dy."

I nodded. "Anything new?" I asked Lock after they were seated. It was then that I noticed Lock Trayton looked completely shattered. His eyes were bloodshot and his hands as he unfolded a napkin were unsteady. "Nothing," he said.

"It's—it's ghastly," Lou added. "They won't even let us make funeral arrangements."

I don't know why I was aware almost immediately that something was askew. Perhaps it was the way they all watched each other or maybe just the little frown between Lou's level brows that she forgot to wipe away or Lock's upset poise. Anyway, I had the feeling they had all pounced on me as though the three of them didn't want to be alone together, sort of like a trio of hungry cannibals upon a missionary. I didn't feel like a missionary, however, so I decided to probe.

"When did you hear about it, Pinto?"

"Just now." He looked at me steadily a moment, then a grin began at the corner of his long mouth and spread across his big, homely face. "You wouldn't by any chance have

your sheriff's badge on, would you?"

I don't know Pinto really well but I remembered from past experience that you might just as well put your cards on the table at the beginning or you were apt to look foolish later on. Pinto's brazen frankness had stripped many of Dy's carefully designed pretenses down to their naked, ugly truths.

"When I take over, podner," I told him, "I'll pin on my nice shiny star. But I might warn you that anything you say now may be used against you."

He nodded. "Why don't we say what we're thinking? Dy was a stinker and we all hated her."

Lock Trayton caught his breath and, I'm sure, was on the point of remonstrating but then I guess he wanted to hear what Pinto was going to say. Pinto paused and shot him a glance, then went on, "Just for the records, I didn't shoot her. I was just coming back to put the snatch on a piece of uncle's money. Even if I didn't need it, which I damn well do, understand, I couldn't bear to see a little stinkpot like Dy get all that dough just by going through with a phony ceremony."

Lock Trayton was on his feet. "I won't stand for that kind of talk about Dyanne. You either take that back, Peter Jones, or get out of here." Lock didn't raise his voice but his words carried his own particular brand of authority.

Pinto deliberately selected a cigarette and eyed Lock testily over the lighted match. Then he got slowly to his feet. "Sorry. I won't take a single word back. She was a cheap, two-timing dame and you know it." He picked up his hat and, with a nod to Lou and me, walked out of the room.

Lock watched him to the door, rage peeking around the corners of his face. Lou picked up her purse and fidgeted. "Lock, I'm not hungry. Let's go."

I had never experienced, I reflected, a better nor more unpredictable lunch.

Chapter VI

I WAS IN the small banquet room of the Frontier opening windows

when Lafe wheezed in, faintly redolent of skunk.

"Well, if it ain't our little early bird," he greeted. "All ready to pin on your shiny badge and go to work?"

"I'm a deputy in San Joaquin county, remember? And I'm not early nor even eager. I just want to make sure you don't hang the wrong man."

Lafe fixed on me a fish-eyed stare. "I suppose you want to horn in on the questionin'. Be the so-o-o beautiful female deppity who solves the case and gets her pitchures in all the papers?"

My first impulse was to get mad but Lafe had grounds for professional jealousy. So I said, "Lafe, darling, didn't anybody ever tell you you were beautiful, too?" Lafe started to cuss. I went on hurriedly. "No, thanks. It's all yours. I don't want any part of it a-tall."

Lafe thought that over. "Fact is, you might go along with me if you want to—to take notes, maybe. You know all these people. I figger they might be more at ease with you hangin' around."

What he meant was, he might be more at ease. But I just grinned and said, "O. K."

The conversation naturally turned to the details of Dy's murder. "Did you count the shots?" Lafe asked.

I shook my head. "It's a funny thing," he said. "No one actually counted 'em but everybody 'lows the killer emptied the gun—six shots. But we could only find five slugs. They was three in Miss Dyanne's body and two was way wide of the mark. Hit the patio wall and bounced off. But they warn't a trace of the sixth one." Lafe scratched his head without removing his Stetson. "Mighty funny," he added.

Lock Trayton and Cowhide came in just then, followed shortly by Louella and Pinto. Lafe dived straight into the ordeal. His tongue seemed too big for his mouth with the result that his speech came out as awkward as his gait up and down the room.

"First off," he began, "I want you to know you ain't suspects. This here conference is kinda to talk things over

informal like and see if we can't get somethin' to go on."

"Accordin' to Cowhide," he continued, "the deceased went back into the front patio of the Mission and over to the southwest corner where she was shot. As I get it, somebody was standin' 'longside the east wall, otherwise Cowhide woulda seen 'em. Right?"

Cowhide nodded. Lafe turned to Louella. "Miss Regan, you didn't see no horseback rider either?" Louella's narrow, piercing eyes were underscored by purplish shadows and she sat on the edge of her chair, taut and straight. There was an edge to her voice. "No, no one."

"Then there ain't none of you can rightly say that the murderer got away on horseback, right?" Lafe tilted his chair back to a precarious angle and looked us over one by one. "Coulda been jest a runaway nag come along right then, or," he added, "could be the murderer made him run away to throw the rest of you off'n the trail."

Louella Regan quickly removed her gaze from the scrutiny of her neat, grey reptile pumps and slid it carefully from one face to another around the little group. Lock Trayton's fine, dark eyes widened and he opened his mouth as though to say something, then merely wagged his head. Cowhide just slouched a little deeper in his chair and continued to scowl. It was Pinto Jones who did the talking.

"You wouldn't be insinuating, would you, Sheriff," he said, "that one of the wedding party bumped her off, started the horse on a run, then rejoined the others?"

Lafe gave Pinto a surprised glance but from the tone of his voice I got the impression he was surprised at his impertinence rather than at his inference. "Like I said, Pinto. Ain't none of you under suspicion—yet."

Pinto watched the others squirm, then grinned lazily at Lafe. "Well, you can include me out. I got in on the Cochise Limited this morning. You can ask Louella."

"I'll ask the conductor," Lafe retorted. "By the way, any of you know

anyone who has a Colt .38?"

Lock Trayton shifted his long legs uneasily and pinched the knife-blade crease back in his uppermost trouser leg.

"Were those .38 slugs you found?" Cowhide asked, slipping out of his lethargy.

"Yep. What do you know about 'em?" Cowhide glanced anxiously at Lock whose jaw was set tight. Lock gave him a look of threatening hostility.

Lafe was abrupt. "Git the cinch off'n that tongue of your'n, Cowhide."

"Just asking, that's all, Sheriff."

LAFE'S GAZE slid cautiously over Lock Trayton. He wasn't forgetting Lock could flick him out of his deputy job as easy as ashes off a cigarette.

"Where didja say you were, Lock, when the killer fanned that gun?"

"Up in the organ loft with Miss Johnson."

"Did Miss Dyanne have an special enemies you know about?"

"Enemies?" Pinto broke in. "She didn't have anything else but. She was a hell-cat. Everybody who ever met her wanted to shoot her. We ought to post a five thousand dollar reward for the killer—and pay it to him."

The bristles on Lafe's nose, which is as bulbous as an old barrel cactus, stood straight up. "I'm not askin' you, Pinto Jones," he said. "Keep that talkin' machine cut off 'cept when I ask you somethin'."

Louella told him she knew of no one. "Dy wasn't a bad sort," she said. "She did a lot of nice things for people."

I did a double take on that one, and set it down to post-funeral sentiment, the kind where people speak well of the dead just because being deceased seems to give you diplomatic immunity.

"Warn't no one in the Mission durin' the ceremony 'ceptin' the principals, was they?"

Louella hesitated and a charged silence fell over the room which served to increase the impact of her

reply. "I really don't know. I wasn't there."

Lafe's jaw dropped. I wheeled around to see if she weren't joking. She was serious, all right. In fact, she wore a studied, irritated look reminiscent of a chess player who has just made the wrong move.

Under Lafe's questioning stare, she added, "I can't explain it. I went to the Mission with Bucky but all of a sudden I just couldn't go in. I'd rushed so all day, making arrangements and attending to details that—well, I just wanted to relax, I guess. I stood outside enjoying the night and then sauntered up the Holy Cross hill."

"You were up there sittin' on top of that hill, Miss Regan," Lafe said finally, "when them shots were fired?"

"Yes." Lou seemed to have a frog in her throat.

"You were a-sittin' up there where you could see all over that there country and still you didn't see nothin'?"

"No, it was too dark."

Lafe gave her his beagle look. "Yore footprints were found by that there wall where the killer mighta stood when he took aim."

Lock was on his feet. "Are you accusing Miss Regan?" His voice was pitched high. It was the first time in my life I'd seen Lock Trayton moved out of his calm, good-natured ways.

Louella spoke up. "Of course, you found my footprints, Mr. Raterlee. I walked by the wall on my way to Holy Cross hill." I marveled at the way she had recovered her aplomb. She was again the cool, unruffled Louella Regan I'd always known.

"Thank you, Miss Regan." Lafe turned to Lock. "I had it all figgered out that way, Lock, but I had to get her statement for the records."

He drew a bead with his eyes on Cowhide. "You in or outside the car when this happened?"

"Inside."

"That's all, folks," Lafe announced unexpectedly. "As I said before and I say it agin, none of you are suspects—yet."

AS THE others were leaving, Lafe whispered to me that he wanted to see Francie. "Francie! Look here, Lafe Raterlee, you can't suspect Francie. She wasn't even there."

"Who says I suspect her? I can talk to her, can't I? He looked me over suspiciously as we walked down the hall to the Crandell's suite.

Rory answered our knock. Her flabby cheeks flushed when she saw Lafe.

"Well, God love me, if it ain't Lafe Raterlee." She gave him a slap on the chest that almost disjointed him. "Come in and rest your flanks."

"Francie home?" he asked in a cracked voice.

"Yes, she is, Lafe, but she's had one of them faintin' spells of 'ers and she's sleepin'. What can I do for you?"

"Nothin' much. Nothin' at all, I reckon. Just dropped by."

Rory laughed. "Just dropped by to see if my Francie knows anythin' about the shootin' fracas, didn't you? You're as transparent as window glass. Well, she don't and if you ask me, Dy got her comeuppance and if I was you, I'd just list it as suicide and get on to some of the things us Pima county taxpayers are payin' you for."

Lafe bristled. "Where was your Francie at the time of the weddin'?"

Rory's bosom started pumping like a hand organ. "Are you tryin' to insinuate somethin', you old skeleton?" she asked him.

"No, Rory," I said, trying to pacify her. "It's just that Lafe has to ask these questions. It's all routine."

She was on her feet, snorting like a mad bull. "He does, does he? Well, I'll tell the old skull and bones where Francie was. She was at a rodeo association meetin' with me. Secretary, she was. And we've got a couple hundred witnesses. And now, Lafe Raterlee, get out and don't come back until you've got a civil tongue in your head."

Lafe was scared of Rory. He backed out mumbling apologies.

"She's plain pizen when it comes to that girl of hers," he said. "If anythin' happened to Francie, I reckon

on Rory Crandell would take a gullet of lead."

Lafe left me. As I wandered back to my room, I was filled with strange misgivings. Only Pinto Jones, with his caustic but honest tongue, had seemed normal that afternoon.

Chapter VII

THE BAR of the Frontier was dim, packed to sardine room only, and smelled of horses, rodeo patrons, Brahma steers and occasionally of liquor. Over the background babble of the crowd Rory Crandell's voice arose at times, its volume equalled only by that of her laugh.

Going up on the mezzanine, I paused for a second to glance down into the lobby. My eyebrows automatically flipped up at the sight of Francie sharing a sofa with, of all people, Pinto Jones. Pinto looked quite pleased with himself but I noticed that Francie watched the entrance to the bar in a state of worried abstraction and probably didn't even know Pinto was there.

"Disgusting, isn't it?" drawled a voice at my elbow. I turned to find Cowhide eyeing the confusion and shaking his head.

"Hi, Cowhide," I said. "Is anybody watching you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, from where I stand it looks as though Francie was watching Rory, you are watching Francie. I just wondered where it went from there."

"Nobody'd bother to ride herd on me, if that's what you mean. But if that horse trainer down there so much as thinks about making a pass at Francie I'll kill him."

Cowhide leaned over the balcony, one booted foot on the lower railing and his elbow on the higher one as though it were a corral fence. "Oh, grow up, Cowhide," I told him. "You act as though you and Francie were both six and someone else was giving her bubble gum."

No comment. Cowhide continued staring in sullen silence. I wanted to remind him of what he and Dy had done to Francie but that, I decided, was probably what motivated his dis-

agreeable mood.

A reshuffling of the crowd drew our attention to the entrance to the bar. Out came Rory Crandell. Heading for a door across the lobby, she spotted Frances and stopped abruptly. Rage seemed to flash from those prominent black eyes and I girded myself for the storm that seemed sure to break. Rory opened her mouth, then for some reason, did a complete change over. A crafty smile curled her lips as she advanced toward her daughter and Pinto.

"Hiyah, Pinto, you old horse thief," she said. "Whadda you know?"

"Hello, Rory," he said. "Join us?"

"Hell, no. The night's young. What's the matter with you? Springhalted? This ain't no place to spark my daughter."

Francie was quiet, jaw set. She kept rolling up the brim of her soft felt hat. Even Pinto looked ill at ease as heads began to turn.

"When I was your age—Francie's, that is," she amended, "I danced all night. Or maybe you're in mournin'?"

Apparently Pinto didn't know what to say, so Rory persisted, "God love me, you ain't mournin' that little back-stabbin' road runner that got 'erself shot last night, are you?"

Pinto looked around anxiously at the faces turned toward them, shook his head and mumbled something unintelligible from where Cowhide and I stood. Francie rose to go and Pinto leaped to his feet.

"If she'd been a daughter of mine," Rory continued, "I'da taken her across my apron. And do you know what?" She paused to give Pinto a punch in the chest for emphasis. "She couldda been my daughter, too. I couldda married her pa, that is. Yes, sir, Stew Kayne popped the question many a time. And if I'da said 'yes', it'da been Fanny gettin' a bank fulla money. How'd ya like that?"

Francie turned imploring eyes to Pinto. Taking Rory firmly by the arm, he edged her through the growing circle about them.

Rory freed her arm with a sudden yank. "Money or no money, my Fan-

ny is worth a whole herd of fancy stock like Dyanne Kayne. Besides, I could buy her a whole armload of green orchids, if that's all it takes to draw the flies."

Cowhide watched till the trio went out the door, then put his face in his hands and groaned. It would take real love, I thought to myself, to take on Rory as a mother-in-law. And mother-in-laws reminded me of Juan Oliveras and his unholy passion and the Wishing Shrine and my date with Hank.

IT WAS nine and I was beginning to think he had stood me up when he ambled in, took a look at my chalk-striped suit and candy-striped hat, and whistled. "You look as smart as a French poodle," he said. "Wanta go for an airing?" Knowing what he thought of French poodles, I wasn't flattered.

"Come on, I've got something to tell you." I led him outside to the narrow porch and over into a dark corner to a couple of ancient wicker chairs behind a potted palm. While he was getting his pipe puffing and I was wondering why all pipe smokers go about the ritual acting like supreme court justices, Cowhide came out of the hotel, started down the street to his right, paused a moment and then headed the other way.

"Teddy Beethoven took me to lunch today," I remarked in one of those casual, offhand ways that are so obvious everyone knows right away you're trying to minimize the importance of something. Hank just kept silent, knowing I'd spill it all, which I did. He neatly summed up what I had been thinking. "Teddy must figure Lock's up to something at the Wishing Shrine. What gets me, why is Teddy snooping around? What business is it of his?"

"Everything's his business," I said. "He's as busy as a bird dog scaring up ducks."

"I'd hoped to give Lana Turner the once over tonight," he said, "but maybe we should sit around and see what happens. Lock's up in his room. I noticed him walking around up there when I came along."

The hours crept by like lagging children. Sometimes we talked and again we didn't letting our thoughts run uninhibited. Cowhide never returned and neither did Rory, Frances nor Pinto, not while we were there. Louella came out around ten, moving like a person who had forgotten something important. Her spike heels clicked a frenzied rhythm on the sidewalk. About eleven, the clerk turned out all of the lobby lights save two.

A little while later, Lock sauntered out, announced by the creaking door which he sought to ease shut. He stood on the top step for a moment, lighting a cigar. It was too dark to tell whether he was taking inventory of the street but he took his time going down the steps and walked slowly which was unusual for him. Like Cowhide, he made a right about face at the corner and retraced his steps, passing the hotel.

We were about to take off after him when we pulled up short, stopped by a movement across the street. A shadowy figure was emerging from a dark doorway. A street light caught it for a second and we saw it was a short man. The way he hugged the building, like a bat hunting the dark, we instinctively knew he was trailing Lock. He had the waddle of a duck, the mark of a cowpuncher or rancher who has spent his life in the saddle but the few silhouettes we caught when he was forced into the dim light were so out of focus, we couldn't tell whether he was young or old.

At Hank's suggestion, we crossed the street and traveled along about a half block behind the shadow who was only a short distance from Lock but on the opposite side of the street. Since the night was a black one with a crescent moon, we could see the two only when they passed under a street light. Once at a corner Lock looked around but if he saw either the shadow or us he gave no indication.

We turned south on old Main street, passing a few low adobe buildings, a home or two, and crumbling walls which hinted at better times. The wind sent little flecks of

sand from the dry bed of the Santa Cruz river biting into my face. I pulled a scarf over my head in the fashion of the Mexican women, to keep the dust out of my hair—not, like them, as a precaution against the ill effects of the night air.

the rear serving as a windbreak—

At the approach to the Shrine—a vacant lot with a brown adobe wall at Lock stopped and very deliberately looked around. Motionless, the shadow dissolved into the murk of a pepper tree and we followed suit.

Lock made for the Shrine, disappearing from view, and the shadow slipped furtively to a point abreast of him. Tiptoeing, we reached the pepper tree where the shadow first had stopped and found ourselves close enough to see the tiny flames of the votive candles as they stretched and leaped in the wind like a huddled group of oversized fireflies. The blackness made of them disembodied points of light.

LOCK WAS kneeling, a candle in his hand. He found a hunk of melted tallow where another candle had burned and gone out, dropped some hot wax on it and embedded his candle. There in the flickering candlelight, he looked as penitent as any sinner but sinner or not, Lock Trayton was not in character, any more than I would have been kneeling there.

As the minutes piled up, our position grew more precarious. A workman with one too many passed, giving us a bawdy "Buenas noches." A police car cruising through the district threw its spotlight on us for a second and I thought sure we were lost but so intent apparently was the shadow on watching Lock that he never suspected he himself might be under surveillance.

After five or six minutes, Lock got to his feet with considerable effort and stood for a time, letting the blood limber up his legs. Back on the sidewalk, he hesitated before heading for the nearest street corner. He took refuge in the shadow of an oleander, as lost as I hoped we were. After a while he returned to the Shrine

where he again knelt.

"He's doing a hell of a lot of wishing," Hank whispered.

Whomever or whatever Lock was expecting, failed to materialize and when he came out again he walked along at a swift clip, heading back toward the business district with the shadow hugging his trail like an alter ego. When Lock turned off Main street, and it was evident he was returning to the hotel, the shadow leaned against a stone wall, relaxed for the first time, lighted a cigarette and watched Lock out of sight.

"I'd like to get a look at that hombre's face," Hank said. "Let's tag along with him."

He moved now at a fast gait and we had to halfway dog trot to keep him in sight. We had gone about a block when I suddenly realized we were in a rather unsavory part of town.

The next intersection was Dolores street, a short, narrow alley, actually, lined with squat adobe buildings opening on to the street. At night, it is disarmingly quiet, yet no nice girl would stroll down its two short blocks without a bodyguard. Here and there yellow lamplight peeked from the edges of drawn window shades and the only sounds to be heard were far-off, muted voices and the occasional tinkle of a juke box.

As we entered the street, I went cold with fright and Hank's arm, which I clung to, wasn't much consolation. The place looked deserted and the shadow was nowhere in sight.

The soft, sweet strains of La Paloma floated from a cantina and a lone light burned over a sign across the street. Pausing, we studied the dim succession of doorways, into one of which the shadow must have slipped.

"We've got to keep moving," Hank whispered. "If I had had any idea where this wild goose chase was going to end, I'd never have let you come along."

That's what you think, I told myself. We worked our way half a block down Dolores, cautiously watching on all sides for a hint of a move-

ment, both of us cognizant that the shadow at last might have discovered we were tailing him and both terrified that he might be waiting in some doorway for us. We played at being lovers on our way home although no couple would ever choose Dolores street for a midnight stroll, and midnight it was because church bells several blocks distant were tolling the hour.

"Look, I whispered, indicating a doorway directly across from us. "The shadow." He was standing as stiff and quiet as a cigar store Indian, watching us, with his back braced against a door, trying to get out of an oblique shaft of light. The light showed us a prizefighter face, the kind of a mug that looks as though it had been smashed in. Thick, flat nostrils and grotesque ears. Although we never completely stopped, he knew we had seen him and he walked brazenly out into the street light and started to cross toward us, one hand stuffed into a coat pocket.

Without warning, the world behind us exploded. Hank crushed me into the rough wall of a store front. A gun roared and roared again, reverberating thunderously in the still, dim night. Then it cracked again and again until in my terror, I lost count. Across the street, the ugly little man lay in a heap on the pavement.

Chapter VIII

STILLNESS, more sentient than before, followed the volley of shots. Strangely enough, not a single voice arose in a scream, no morbidly curious crowds poured out of doorways. It simply wasn't that kind of a street.

Moments later, I heard a faint sound, too muffled to place, yet perilously near. I tried not to breathe. Then came the almost imperceptible thud, thud of cautious footsteps. Someone was moving with feline wariness along the building's roof above us. I clung to Hank and waited. After what seemed ages, the sounds grew less distinct and finally melted into the noises of the night.

We waited for minutes before we

dared venture from our dark wall. Hank gave my arm a little tug.

"Give me a head start," he whispered, "while I hot foot it over there. There's a chance he might be alive. Meet you at the corner."

I watched till he rose from the prostrate figure, then flew after him as he hurried away. "He's dead," he said when we met at the intersection.

Keeping me against the buildings, he guided me along the narrow sidewalks till we reached old Main street. Breathless but with infinite relief, we headed back to the Frontier.

In the lobby, Hank left me to 'phone the police and I wearily trudged toward the stairs. If my rubbery legs made it to my room, I vowed, I would lock myself in and it would take more than the entire Tucson police force to get me out. If they wanted my story, they could wait till morning. I rounded a corner of the long hall a bit wobbily, ran into a spidery table that had no business being there, and Rory Crandell's head popped out of her room. I caught a brief glimpse of black, disheveled hair and a full white nightgown that rippled in the breeze like muslin.

"Dammit, it's you," she said. "Might as well try to sleep in a correll fulla cattle."

I waved a paw and kept right on going. My key in the lock made a little rattling noise in the padded stillness of the hall. "Steady, Johnson," I muttered. "Something tells me things are just getting off to a good start." I swung the door open wide, reached in and turned on the lights before I poked a cautious head in. Everything seemed dull and indifferent, just like hotel rooms should look, so I went in.

Pancho blinked, yawned twice and bent a reproachful gaze on me as much as to say, "I've been in for hours." I was relieved to note that Louella apparently had moved back to her own room. I didn't want to talk to or even see another soul. An overpowering inertia, the aftermath of fear and shock, settled over me. I didn't want to undress, I didn't want to think. I only wanted to sink into

forgetfulness. It was beginning to grow light, however, before I accomplished this.

I opened my eyes with infinite relief to find that the mine cave-in which I had just experienced was only Pancho, all twenty pounds of him, sitting on my chest. I fed him, dressed, went down to the coffee shop and had two cups of black coffee, then 'phoned Hank. It was ten o'clock. He suggested I meet him at Herman's Diner across the street from the Bulletin office for a cup of coffee. "Just what I need," I told him, and was there in five minutes. Hank was sitting with his legs tangled up in a high stool flirting with Hortense, the pretty waitress. Hortense picks up a lot of gossip in her business and she funnels it all straight into Hank's waiting ear. It is just good business to flirt with Horthy, or so he keeps telling me.

"The cops couldn't identify the poor devil we saw murdered in Dolores street," he began. "So I waited at the dive where Louey Gonzales stays until he staggered in. Louey hangs around Dolores street and knows most of the characters down there. I sneaked him into the morgue—Louey's shy of the law—and he recognized the hombre. Said he was Rock Morgan, better known as the Mute. Louey said he was a dope smuggler and a killer."

The extent and caliber of Hank's friends and informants never cease to amaze me. Every kind of person from society dowagers to broken-down gangsters.

"THE POLICE found six slugs in him, an automatic in a coat pocket and," Hank paused like an actor to give the news more emphasis, "fifty-five hundred dollars in twenties. They were packed flat in an envelope tied around his chest, right under his arm pits."

The police figured, Hank said, that either he had just been paid for a job or he was on his way to pay off someone else.

"He was about fifty with a two-inch scar above his left temple," Hank continued, reciting from the po-

lice report. "He wasn't wearing the kind of clothes a guy would who has five thousand bucks. A chain store suit, no tie and a cheap shirt."

He wore boots, though, which had expensive tool work on them. They were badly cut, freshly scratched and dusty. The police figured he had been riding through desert chaparral.

Hank, who was feeling the effects of the excitement in spite of his poker playing newspaper training, went to the counter to get our mugs refilled.

"Those are the preliminaries," he said slowly, pouring more sugar than he wanted into his coffee. "I just came from Mike Finnegan's office. Mike made the ballistics tests on the slugs that killed Dyanne; you know. There were five of them, fired from a Colt .38. Mike had plenty of occasion to note the markings and too, he doesn't have many tests to handle, not in a place like Tucson. Not so many, that is, that when he makes an analysis two days later he can't recognize a set of markings."

"Hank! You can't mean . . .?"

"Yep, same gun. Same gun killed Dyanne Kayne and the Mute."

I simply stared at Hank while my mind tried to take in all the implications his revelation suggested.

"Looks like your friend Dy and the Mute were mixed up in some kind of extremely unhealthy racket."

I shook my head. "You know the first thing that struck me? The Mute might have been a paid killer who shot Dyanne, and the real murderer then shot the Mute. That would mean that no one at the wedding has an alibi—if a hired outlaw shot Dy, that is."

"Could be," Hank admitted. "But why was he following Lock Trayton?"

"Hank, have you told the police?"

"That we were trailing Lock? No, I haven't. I didn't see that it was important but that was before I saw Louey."

"Please don't, Hank. Not unless we find it really is important."

"Be your age, lamb chop. Of course, it's important. Either Lock was the number two victim on the

Mute's list or Lock was the Mute's boss. In either case, Lock probably ambushed the Mute and shot him."

Yes, I knew. Nevertheless, I said, "Let's not jump to conclusions. Those are the two obvious explanations. Exactly what the police will pounce on. And Lock is probably perfectly innocent."

"I'll promise you one thing," Hank said. "I'll hold the story 'till the cops have something good to trade."

NOTHING was said for a couple of minutes but I noticed Hank looking at me strangely, his eyes squintier than ever, and then he said, "Bucky, maybe I shouldn't tell you this." He stopped cold, seeming to reconsider. "Tell me what?" I asked, a little hostile since I figured Hank should keep no secrets from me.

"It's about Lock," Hank continued, speaking so low I barely could hear him. "In newspaper work, you learn a lot of things about people that you can't print. Some rumors, some facts. Take old John Morrow. Everyone thinks what a great pioneer he was. He was a pioneer all right, a horse thief. They almost strung him up once. But we don't print that. We tell how he fought off Apaches while he was building up the stage coach line and getting wealthy and . . ."

"Hank," I broke in, "what about Lock?"

Hank took a deep breath. "I hate to shatter your girlish illusions. You've known him all of your life and he's a fine man, honestly, but he doesn't care much where his money comes from. He wouldn't help an outlaw get on his horse but he'd loan him a few grand if he were sure he'd get twenty per cent interest back on his money in a few weeks."

My astonishment must have shown on my face because Hank said, "I knew it'd jolt you. But you mustn't hold it too much against him. He thinks of it as a straight financial transaction. He lends money — to anyone. What they do with it is their business. He's not the only one. I could tell you about some other respectable citizens who bankroll dope and gambling and other rackets."

"Are you positive, Hank? How do you know?"

He looked down indulgently at me and spoke as though to one too young to know the facts of life. "People tell me things, lamb chop. and yes, I'm positive." His tone changed as he continued. "He's too much of a political power for the authorities to jump on and he doesn't interfere with justice. If the Border Patrol kills someone like Louey, Lock chalks it off as a bad business investment. But that doesn't happen very often."

I was numb, the way you are when you first learn as a child that Uncle Harry is no teetotaler.

Hank reported the police had found the store building empty—the building where we had heard the steps running across the roof.

"Let's take a look at Dolores in the sunlight," I suggested, getting brave all of a sudden, the way you do when there's someone you want to impress.

"Nothing doing," Hank said. "It's too dangerous."

"Oh, fiddlefaddle. Maybe Cowhide wouldn't be too scared to take me."

Hank took the bait, partly because he'd already secretly sold himself on the idea he might get a news story down there.

Chapter IX

THE PENETRATING brilliance of the late morning sun completely dissipated the menace of the night before, yet Dolores street remained a hostile, foreboding place. No sunbaked babies played and squalled in its dust, no housewives gossiped through open windows. As far as I could determine, Hank and I were the only living things. There wasn't even the friendly reassurance of a half-starved, stray dog sniffing at the curbs. It was so still, the clomp-clomping of my boot heels on the sidewalk sounded like a stampede. Hank frowned and gave me the unwanted tagalong treatment.

"Now I know where to come for a little peace and quiet," I remarked. "I feel as though I should tiptoe and whisper."

"You couldn't wake these people."

They're all sleeping off last night's hangovers so they can get some more tonight."

"Too bad, then, because if there's anything I hate when I'm trying to sleep, it's two people walking around on the roof. Incidentally, how do you propose to get up there?"

By this time we had reached the spot where we had cowered in a doorway while shots rang out above us the night before. The adobe building was empty, according to the police, and devoid of clues. A rickety corrugated iron porch ran across the front, supported by three wooden timbers worn slick and wobbly from having to support the roof and unsteady pedestrians as well.

"Maybe there's a back entrance," I suggested.

"But there isn't any alley. That's what this elongated den of iniquity really is."

"They must have some place to put their garbage," I insisted. "If we could get around back, I'll bet we could find a way to the roof."

Hank stood back and ran a squinted eye up the slick poles of the porch. Next he tried the adobe front and shook his head. "I sure can't shinny up here."

We walked past a store marked barber shop and another silent, windowless building, all adjoining. But between it and the next ramshackle group was a narrow gap of less than a foot, a thin slice of daylight plugged up at the far end by some boards a little higher than our heads. On the floor of the passageway was the accumulation of years of tin cans, papers, weeds and refuse.

"Maybe you'd better stay here." Hank contemplated the narrow passageway and the debris with consummate distaste. "I'll crawl back and see if I can get through those boards."

"O. K." I agreed. "But if you make it, I'm coming."

After much muttering and thrashing about he made it to the board barrier. I could see it give under his probing thrusts and he soon slipped out of sight.

Determined to follow him, I start-

ed in. Crumbling dirt from both walls trickled down my neck fore and aft, cobwebs tugged at my face and all sorts of unseen hazards underfoot threatened my balance. Lizards crawled over my groping fingers and make rattling noises in the papers at my feet. At last I reached the end of the crevice, pushed the boards back and peeked through.

Hank, cobwebby, dirty and with a long tear in his pants, put a warning finger to his lips. The area behind the building was only a few feet wide and filled with all manner of junk. Hank, perched precariously on an old victrola cabinet, was peering into a dirt-encrusted window set high up in the wall. Working my way around the skeleton of a Model T Ford which must have been there when the place was built or dropped from heaven, I put my ear to a solid-looking wood door and listened. I heard nothing. Hank, by the sign language, also reported negative results.

It was an easy climb from the top of the victrola cabinet to the window sill, to the low, flat roof and, noiselessly as possible, I followed Hank.

"If I hadn't been here last night," I said, "I'd swear this part of town had been evacuated."

"It should be," was Hank's emphatic reply.

All of the roofs were flat, slanting slightly toward the rear to carry off water. They were all of the asphalt variety and strewn with chat. The crunching of the fine gravel under our feet was just as loud when we tiptoed cautiously as when we didn't, so we tried to act nonchalant about it. By mutual though unvoiced consent we avoided the center portions as though they were graves and walked along the edge of the roof until we came to what we judged to be the building we wanted, the roof where the stealthy footsteps had died away after the shadowy figure across the street had slumped lifelessly to the ground.

BELOW us slanted the wavy iron roof of the little porch. From our new perspective the shoddy build-

ings across the street seemed only a long arm's reach. Even at night, the man slinking along the opposite sidewalk had been an easy target.

The bare, graveled rooftop gave no hint of last night's killer. It looked just like all its neighbors except it had a few more patches and seemed a little more dilapidated. From the rear, the tops of the surrounding buildings stretched in all directions like dozens of odd-sized packing boxes stacked in a warehouse.

"From the way the sound of his footsteps diminished," I mused, "the killer must have walked back here. But how do you suppose he got down?"

"The cops think he leaped from roof to roof and came down on some other street." Hank shook his head, discouraged.

"There must be some other way of getting down besides that wormhole we came through," I said, scanning the flat hot surfaces about me.

It was then that, simultaneously, our eyes caught a newish-looking strip of roofing paper at the very end of the building, far smeared, with bits of gravel clinging to it. Hank moved as soundlessly as possible over to the patch and ran a finger under the edge. He beckoned to me. "Looks like a trap door," he whispered.

Neatly concealed under the overlapping edges of the roofing paper was a rectangular board frame big enough to admit a man's body. Instantly on guard, I glanced around guiltily. The whole panorama was static, so completely still and quiet that a feeling of unreality possessed me. Before I quite knew what was happening, Hank grabbed hold of the edges and jerked back the trap door.

Below we saw a narrow space between walls scarcely more than two feet wide, and a few cleats nailed to form a crude ladder. The empty store room obviously had a false rear wall. The contrast of sun and shade was so great we could see little beyond the well of sunlight.

Hank took a firm grip on my arm and pulled me back. I held on to the first rung of the ladder. "Listen, gor-

geous," he said. "Just because you're a dollar-a-year deputy sheriff is no reason I should shed my virile blood. I'm going back to journalism."

He made like to go and I went down the ladder. A minute later he was down on the dusty floor with me, whispering in my ear.

"Be careful of your language," he said. "We may not be alone."

"Let's just see where this passage goes. We can always go tearing out if it gets crowded." Nevertheless, I had to keep reminding myself that it was broad daylight and therefore nothing gruesome could possibly happen.

Warmth and light ended abruptly beyond the shaft of sunlight admitted by the trap door. There seemed to be only a thin interim of thick greyness before blackness set in. We paused a moment to accustom our eyes and gradually the studding of the false wall took on shape. Hank's shoulders ahead of me filled the narrow passageway and completely obstructed my view. We had gone only a short distance when the flimsy wall ended and we found ourselves in a tunnel, walled in with adobe mud. The path turned unexpectedly at right angles and the air changed instantly to the clammy, foul-smelling atmosphere of underground, unventilated places.

Hank's arm shot out in a restraining gesture as he stumbled, caught his balance and stood up again, his head at my eye level.

"Steps," he muttered. "Bucky, I don't like the smell of this." He broke off sharply and I held my breath, listening. A tiny avalanche of dirt slid noiselessly to the hard-packed floor of the tunnel.

"I won't have you going any farther," he whispered. "You go back to the light and wait for me. I want to see where these steps go."

I didn't say anything and Hank took my silence for assent. He moved cautiously down the steps, striking a match. It was amazing the amount of light one lone match made in the blackness. The shadow of Hank's shoulders lurched along the crumbling walls behind him, like the figure

of a pursuing ape. As the flame petered out, Hank and the grotesque shadow disappeared wraithlike. I stood looking down at the place in the darkness where they had been, waiting for another match to cast a friendly gleam. No light came. No sound. Again the feeling of unreality possessed me, like the instants after awakening in darkness from a bad dream. I waited, forgetting to breathe, while time stood still.

AT LONG last, I started down, cautiously feeling out each worn step. Suddenly, I stopped. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. I wheeled around and then I knew. The passageway was in complete darkness. The feeble glimmer of light from the trap door some distance back no longer shone through. Someone had closed the opening. Instinctively I opened my mouth to shout to Hank but I stifled the words in my throat. No use giving away my fears and my whereabouts. Better to hide with the hope of slipping out. Besides, where was Hank?

Again I paused to listen. Over the thumping of my frightened heart, I heard little noises, the rustling of a small animal, rat or lizard, bits of soil falling—and stealthy footsteps? Or was my imagination working overtime? Maybe I heard Hank, working his way toward me in the blackness. In that tunnel it was impossible to place sounds.

I crept on down, feeling the crumbly walls and praying for a recess where I could hide—and wait. I went a thousand steps before my groping toes felt an uneven floor stretch out beneath them. How brave I had been, I reflected bitterly, in the bright sunlight of the roof. Now, a few minutes later, I was cowering in a tarantula hole, afraid to go on, afraid to stand still in the middle of a narrow passage and terrified of the thing behind me that had shut out the light and escape and safety. I felt the muscles above my knees, too long held taut during the steep descent, go weak and flabby like a stretch-out spring.

Where was Hank? Why didn't he come back?

The passageway was no wider than my outstretched elbows. No longer of adobe bricks, it felt cold and damp and rough, as though hewn out of rock. Alternately bewailing my luck at having no matches and reminding myself I wouldn't dare light one if I had it, I kept feeling for a door, a recess, some means of escape. Escape. That was the only explanation of Hank's disappearance. My morale soared at the thought, then as suddenly took a nose dive. He wouldn't leave me in here. But maybe he thought I was safe at the opening where he had ordered me to wait for him.

Was that a footstep? I stopped in my tracks, listening. Silence, heavy and ominous. I was hearing things, imagining things. I leaned against the wall, making a supreme effort to relax, to breathe slowly. I listened again and this time I was sure of it. Slow, distant footsteps. Hank's? Or some unknown person's?

There was no way of telling. Silently, I wormed my way along the rough wall. The tunnel was scarcely wide enough to allow two people to pass. Certainly too narrow to allow one to pass unnoticed.

The vague sounds gradually began to take on character, even direction. They were the wary footsteps of someone moving cautiously without a light, someone coming toward me from the direction of the trap door.

Unexpectedly the course of the passage turned. It seemed a trifle wider at the bend and there was an ever-so-faint depression in the wall. Flattening myself out, my back to the wall, I waited. The heavy steps came nearer, nearer until they seemed to thunder in my ears. Instinctively I knew those heavy, lunging steps were not Hank's. I tried to push myself closer to the wall, turning my face away and burying it in my shoulder lest my breath, which insisted on coming out in jerky little gasps, give me away. A silly precaution, I reflected in endless seconds before he came abreast, because it was a hundred to one he'd run into me.

I SMELLED the stale odor of cheap, strong tobacco in dirty, un-aired clothing even before a rough shoulder brushed my face. Time simply ran down and stopped like an unwound phonograph. He seemed to come to me and stop. And then he started up again. Or did he really stop? The incredible had happened. He was going on. He had passed me. Finally, I came to the realization that I had had my eyes tightly closed in the blackness. I opened them and began to breathe again. Aching muscles, too long held at attention, began crying out but I still didn't dare move. The heavy footsteps continued down the corridor.

Cautiously I leaned forward, sending little particles of dirt thundering to the floor. I would wait, giving the man time to get out of earshot. I suppose it had been only instants since the form passed me but in my jubilant mind it was well into the past. Blessed sunlight seemed only around the dark corner. Then hope died within me. The footsteps hesitated and came to a stop. I heard the man mutter something to himself. Unintelligible at first, I pieced the sounds together in the manner of a semi-deaf person. "Perfume!" That's what he'd said. My heart sank to my toes and my lungs ceased to operate. He had smelled my perfume.

The scratching of a match against rock, the brief flare as it passed across a coarse swarthy face, these things I was conscious of before I tore myself away from my temporary place of safety and pitched into the blackness, heading for the trap door. One moment in my flight the uneven floor would come up to meet me, the next the wall would strike out at me, and finally I fell headlong up some steps.

Picking myself up, I was vaguely conscious of the striking of a match somewhere behind me. In a matter of seconds, I was pushing the trap door open and scrambling into the blinding noonday sun. After one sweeping glance up and down the roofs, I returned to Dolores street the way we had come. It was as oddly deserted as when we had begun our strange

and terrible prowl. Hank laying prostrate, dead, maybe still alive, trying to escape from those dark tunnels. My dark thoughts leaped from one horror to another, and I felt as though I were at his funeral.

I flagged a taxi and when I said, "Frontier hotel," the driver looked his surprise. I didn't care if it were only four blocks away. My legs wouldn't have carried me another step.

As I elbowed through the lobby, Jake, the clerk on duty, called to me. "Miss Johnson, a special delivery letter came for you about an hour ago. I sent it up to your room."

I scarcely heard him. I went to my room, picked up the 'phone and called the Bulletin. No Hank. Neither had his home heard from him. I had given the operator Lafe Raterlee's number when some misgiving caused me to hang up. I'd wait a few minutes more, I told myself, before bringing Lafe down on me with his questions and recriminations.

I snatched the special delivery letter up from where it lay just inside my door and looked for the return address. There was none. The envelope was the kind the post office sells with the stamp printed on it.

Flopping down on the bed, I held the letter up to the bedside lamp and looked it over. Then I got a nail file and opened it. I pulled out a note written in a fine Spencerian hand which read: "Important—New York Chronicle—June 29, 1935."

I LOOKED inside the envelope again but there was nothing else. The post mark, I noted, was Tucson, and dated 11:30 that morning. Someone, obviously, felt there was something in that issue which I should know about. Something having a bearing on the murder of Dyanne Kayne? But why tip me off? Why not the police? And, biggest question of all, who? Who could have mailed it? Well, Hank had connections in New York. He could get someone to read the paper of that date.

Hank! My heart lurched every time I thought of him. I glanced at my wrist watch. Only five minutes

had passed but I was too frantic to wait any longer. I grabbed up the 'phone to call Lafe but as I did so, its bell sounded. Miracle of miracles! It was Hank. The relief at hearing his voice was almost more than I could bear.

"Are you decent?" he asked. "I'm coming up."

A moment later he was holding me in an embrace that threatened to break every one of my poor, tired bones and I didn't ever want him to take his arms away. Despite my late nightmare, the bells rang out and I heard sweet music. Some day, I reminded myself, I must sign him up before some other gal beat me to it.

"Now," he said after putting me in a big chair and pulling up an ottoman for my feet, "tell uncle all about it."

I told all and the effect was miraculous—on me, that is. Just give me a sympathetic listener and the result is the same as sulfa on a fever.

"And now," I said impatiently when I'd finished, "please account for yourself. Where did you go from that worm hole we were in? When you did your disappearing act, I mean."

Hank shook his head. "So help me, I don't know exactly what happened. I suppose I went farther than I realized but I kept imagining the place was getting lighter and sure enough I came out into a room which led to an alley off Huston street. I retraced my steps back to the trap door on the roof and was scared pink when I didn't find you there."

"Hank, what kind of a rat trap do you suppose that is down there?"

"It ain't no kindergarten," he replied. "Old Tom Gillins used to regale me by the hour with tales of that section."

Gillins is a retired police sergeant and one of the oldest living members of the State Historical society.

"Seems that in the early days of Tucson," Hank continued, "when they finally started hanging desperadoes instead of pinning sheriff's badges on them, Dolores street became a hide-out for renegades. Tom says that the smugglers, rustlers and

plain and fancy killers dug more underground passages than there are catacombs in Rome.

"When the U. S. marshal barged in the front door of a cantina, looking for some hombre, the fugitive would duck for the basement and come out two blocks away. He'd jump on a horse, race down the old Camino Real and head for the Mexican border."

He pulled a big revolver out of the pocket of his jacket. "Look at what I found down there. In the room the tunnel led to. It was a dirty, smelly place. Had a dirt floor, a mattress in one corner and a chair or two. There was a drunk on the mattress. Scared me silly. I was leaving when he groaned. Guess he was having a nightmare. Anyway, I looked his way, ready to slug someone, and the glint of this gun stopped me. It was on the floor by his head. It's a .38 and just on a hunch I picked it up."

"I'd better call Mike Finnegan right away," he added, reaching for the 'phone. He chewed his recovered pipe stem until the connection was completed. "Mike? Hank Noyes. I've got a gun I think you ought to take a look at. Yeah, it's a .38. Took it off a drunk down in Dolores street. Well, it's a long story, Mike. You can read it in the next issue of the Bulletin."

Hank put the receiver back in its cradle. "Mike's sending over for it right away. Well, I've got to get back to the office."

Then I remembered the special delivery letter and handed him the note.

"Geronimo's whiskers!" was his only audible reaction.

"Do you know someone in New York you can get to work on it?"

"Yeah," he answered absentmindedly. I could see a news story taking shape in his mind. There are times when I'm convinced Hank has a printing press for a brain. "I'll call you back soon's I have any news." He gave me a quick peck on his way out, came back for an encore and was gone.

THERE WERE two things that I longed for more than any others

in the world at that moment, a hot shower and food. I got them in the order named. Then I cuddled up beside Pancho on the bed to think things over. He aroused to give me a nasty look, then put one paw over his eyes and went back to sleep. Sometime later a soft tapping at my door brought me to the amazing realization that I had dozed off.

"Who is it?"

"Louella."

"Come in," I called, mildly surprised. Lou looked smart and brittle on the outside and all poohed out on the inside. I indicated the most comfortable chair and her gaze covered its cretonne upholstery with the thoroughness of a vacuum cleaner to make sure it was safe for her expensive, soft navy suit. She sat down and crossed her knees carefully. I waited silently as she got out a wafer-thin silver case and selected a cigarette as though she knew one of them contained a pearl.

"Aren't you going to make some small talk," she said when she had gotten it going, "so I can pretend I just dropped in to shoot the breeze?"

"Well, let's see. How's this: Cora Makeby—the girl at the wedding, you know—had her baby last night. A strapping boy and everything's just fine."

I happened to glance at Louella and surprised the oddest expression on her face, a look of almost animal-like fierceness. What's the matter Lou? Babies, small talk. You asked for it."

Never slow in her reactions, Louella did a lightning change of face. "Dy's murder," she murmured. "It's got me going. Sometimes I—I don't think I can stand it."

"Oh, come on, Louella. Let's cut the small talk. Dyanne was a heel and just how big a tramp no one on this earth knows quite as well as you. Why all the nerves? Not grief, surely."

I sounded like Pinto Jones, I reflected, but on Louella Regan it was the only treatment. No point in pampering a kid glove when you know it contains an iron fist.

"There are times, Kay Johnson,"

she said unexpectedly and entirely without sarcasm, "when I wish you weren't so smart. Still, that's exactly why I came to you. Lafe Raterlee's a fool. He'll never solve this case. And I can't sit around here the rest of my life. I've got to leave here. Understand? Got to."

"So you want me to go in there and solve the case?"

Louella had something ready on the top of her tongue but she didn't release it. The conversation wasn't going the way she had rehearsed it and I could quite appreciate how she felt. She put on an extremely earnest face and managed to get that fox-terrier look out of her eyes.

"All right, so I'm not in mourning and Dy did lead me through merry hell. But I asked for it. I thought I was on the gravy train. But just when I thought I was going to cash in, well, Dy got murdered."

"You mean Dy was going to make a settlement with you?"

She nodded. "At least she promised. And I have reason to believe she would have." I didn't like the gleam in Louella's eyes. It sparkled of blackmail to me. She read my thoughts and said defensively. "God knows, Kay, I earned it. If I had worked and slaved like that for anyone else—anyone but a relative—I'd have been well paid for it. Am I such a callous, grasping woman just because I expect it from my sister's child?"

"No, certainly not," I agreed, "but I don't see how solving Dy's murder is going to help you. If you have nothing more tangible in support of your claims than the promise from a person now dead..."

"But that's just it." She looked at me intently, appraisingly, then let loose of it. "I do have something. Her promise in writing. That's legal—I mean, it will stand up in court, won't it?"

I nodded. "But—but don't you see," she continued, "I can't do anything about it now? They'll think I shot her."

"Why?"

"Well, they just will, that's all."

I shook my head. "Not unless Dy-

anne was worth more to you dead than alive, they won't."

LOU SEEMED to consider that a moment, then tried a new tack. "It's a horrible, nasty mess. And I don't like messes. I want to get it cleared up." She tried to stretch out a little smile to cover the exasperation on her face. "You will help me, Kay. You won't admit it but I know you're just as anxious to solve this crime as anybody. I can help you, too, you know. If there's anything you want to know about Dyanne's past, just anything at all, I'll tell you."

Anything I want to know about anyone's past, I thought, so long as it isn't yours. "How long did you live with Dy, Lou?"

"Since she was thirteen. And she would have been twenty-six next month. Let's see, that would be thirteen years."

"You looked after her and shared her home and income, I take it, just as though you were her mother."

The hint of a sneer tugged at the corner of Louella's narrow lips. "That depends on what you mean by share. If you mean shared her cast off clothing and the maid's room of the Fifth avenue apartment Uncle Charley furnished for her, well, yes, I did."

My eyebrows slid up. "Where did the maid go?"

"I was the maid after Charley disappeared—died, that is."

"How come?"

"Charley Kayne was an eccentric old devil, you know. I guess he thought it would do Dyanne good to learn the value of money. He'd gotten his dough the hard way and was darned close with it. And the trust fund he set up just before he jumped into the river left Dy just enough to meet expenses."

"I guess he thought she'd go to work, but not her. She fired the maid and told me I could work for my keep."

I looked at Louella in amazement. "Why on earth did you stand for it?"

"I promised my sister—Dy's moth-

er, that is—on her death bed that no matter what happened, I'd look after Dy. And I kept my promise."

"I know Lafe has asked you this, Lou, but can't you think of some disgruntled boy friend, one who was insanely jealous or one Dyanne had tricked?"

Louella grinned maliciously. "Plenty. But none crazy enough to follow her out here and murder her."

"She never got involved with any? Never had any serious affair after her separation from Cowhide?"

In the instant Louella hesitated, a faint flush crept into her cheeks. She ignored it, naturally, but I know from embarrassing experiences that blushes cannot be turned off, no matter how desperately you want to. She shook her head in an effort to cover up. "Not that I know of. Though, of course, I wasn't her mother confessor by any means."

"Louella, tell me about Pinto. His relationship with the family and, well, what he's really like."

Louella lit another cigarette with characteristic fastidiousness before she answered. "As for what he's really like, you know the answer as well as anyone, I think. Peter appears to wear his soul on his sleeve—his frankness and all—but I doubt whether he has ever let anyone see the real Pinto. Orphans are often like that—if they're not adopted when they're babies. I think Peter was around ten when Dy's father picked him up off the New York streets and gave him a home. That was before Sis was married. Sis didn't like the idea of mothering a ten-year-old waif and Peter just sort of faded out of the picture. He and Stewart Kayne—Sis's husband—though, were very close and he was broken hearted when Stewart committed suicide."

I interrupted her. "Was Pinto ever formally adopted?"

LOUELLA nodded. "Stewart insisted. Sis was furious and it caused their first quarrel. Dyanne always resented Peter as a brother, so he kept out of the way. Oh, he used to come around once or twice a year, maybe, but he was always very

mysterious about himself. He always looked prosperous. I don't know what he did or anything about him, really, except that Uncle Charley gave him quite a large sum of money once. I think it was around twenty-five thousand dollars. Dy was fit to be tied because Charley wouldn't make a settlement on her. Dy said that Pinto waived further claim to the estate for all time. All I know, actually, is what dear little Dy chose to tell me."

"Pinto went to New York for the reading of the will, didn't he? Do you think he expected to be mentioned in it?"

"I don't know," Louella answered slowly. "He claimed he was there on business, still . . ." She left the sentence unfinished. "He didn't act disappointed. Congratulated Dyanne on her haul, as he put it, and said he'd see her in church. He meant the ceremony with Cowhide."

"He knew you were flying back and all about the wedding plans?"

Louella nodded. "Say, what are you driving at? If you think Pinto had anything to do with Dyanne's death, you're crazy. Peter may not be an open book but he's no murderer."

I just grinned my answer to that one. "Oh, all right," she conceded finally. "But he couldn't have done it. He was en route here from New York. I saw him get off the train." I don't know why I got the impression that although Louella's voice stopped, her thoughts kept traveling.

"Louella," I asked, "do you know who called Dy that night before we left for the Mission—when she sent us out of the room?"

The way she straightened up a little told me she was en garde, like a duelist with a rapier.

"No," she said, taking a deep breath. "No, I don't. The call frightened Dy, didn't it?"

She sat for a moment puzzling over something, twisting a button nervously, the way you do when you're trying to hide your thoughts and they show up in your hands instead of your face.

"It may have had something to do with the letter," she said, feeling her way slowly.

"The letter? What letter?" I asked.

"It was from Uncle Charley."

"Uncle Charley!" I gasped, incredulous.

Lou nodded. "He had written it before he committed suicide. He said he was sending it to a friend to hold until the day of Dy's wedding."

"Dy got up that morning as happy as a bride, only she wasn't thinking of the bridegroom. 'A half million,' she said as she came out of her bath. 'Oh, brother, what I can't do with those shekels.'"

Lou gave Dy's words a sarcastic, evil inflection. "The letter came after breakfast. But it hadn't been mailed. The desk clerk said someone had put it on the register while he wasn't looking."

"You should have seen her. She was beside herself. 'The crazy old fool,' she kept saying. She swore like a truck driver. I'd never heard her talk like that before. She wouldn't show me the letter and lost her temper completely. Afterwards she got a grip on herself and talked to me about it."

"She said there was a lot of bosh and poppycock in the letter about the sanctity of marriage and how you ought to stay hitched for always and how he was doing everything for her own good."

"There were pages and pages written on lined tablet paper. He quoted a lot of scripture and platitudes but it all boiled down to the fact that if she didn't live with Cowhide she didn't get to keep the money."

"After Dy quieted down she began to figure things out. She thought probably Uncle Charley was bluffing—that there wasn't any legal way he could hold her once the administrator had turned the money over to her, and the will specified very definitely that she would inherit the sum the day of the ceremony."

"But she wasn't taking any chances. 'I'm not a gambler,' she told me. 'Not with a half million bucks anyway. Cowhide's a dumb ox but for a half million I'd live with Dracula.'"

"I pointed out that maybe Cowhide might not like the idea. 'Maybe not,'

said Dy, 'although you should see him when I turn on my charms. He'll live with me if I have to rope him up.'"

A disturbing thought had taken hold of me while Lou was talking. "Did Dy tell anyone about the letter?" I asked with studied indifference. But Louella had lived too long with Dy not to recognize a question filled with portent. After a moment's thought she decided to answer it.

"No," she said, "but Rory may have known. She came in when Dy was at the height of her tantrums. Dy turned on her savagely. 'Why don't you knock?' she screamed. Rory said she had and as a matter of fact, she had, and I had called, 'Come in,' but Dy hadn't heard me. Rory backed out apologetically."

MY THOUGHTS hopped like jack rabbits. If Rory had known before the ceremony that Dy had decided to hold Cowhide for always—to refuse to give him his freedom as she had promised—then Rory might have told Francie. And Rory might have told Cowhide, although it was a moot point whether she would have under the circumstances.

"Did you tell Lock?" I put the question bluntly and studied Louella.

"No, of course not. Why should I tell Lock?" But her voice was off key. She stared fixedly at her cigarette, caught herself, then jumped to her feet.

"Heavens! I've got to run. I'm due at the beauty shop in ten minutes." Picking up her purse and gloves, she walked to the door. With her hand on the knob, she turned around to face me and in an unexpected burst of impulsiveness, said, "Kay, I've worn a front over my real feeling for so long that, well, sometimes I hardly know whether it's the real me talking or my alter ego."

Her brittle poise dissolved before my astonished gaze and as she disappeared through the door in confusion, I caught the glisten of tears in her eyes. Another facet, I thought to myself, of Louella Regan's complex make-up.

The telephone bell brought me ab-

ruptly out of my reverie. It was Hank. Suppressed excitement packed even the usual preliminary badinage. Finally, he got to the point.

"Mike Finnegan from ballistics just 'phoned. That gun I found was the murder weapon all right and they traced the owner from the number. It's Lock Trayton's."

Chapter XI

IT WAS around seven that night when Lock came to see me. If he'd been on horseback, he'd have been a dead ringer for the painting, "The End of the Trail"—you know, that one with horse and rider, heads hanging down, both done in. He sank down in a chair and with a body shake reminiscent of a Great Dane awakening from a bad dream, turned to me.

"I've been answering questions. Polite, apologetic questions, but with stingers in them. I was honored. No less than the chief of police and the county attorney questioned me. They called it 'talking things over'."

For the first time in all the years I'd known him, I saw Lock Trayton as through a haze filter. The illusions I'd held since I was a little girl were gone now forever. His smile appeared patent, his voice rubber treaded, his handsome face a little too well tended. Strange, I thought, I'd never before noticed the insincerity that the high gloss suggested. I was even suspicious of his alert, well-trained mind which he could thumb through like a dictionary, coming up always with the correct word, the right observation.

"They 'talked things over' with me, too," I said. "Only I wasn't so honored. Lafe Raterlee came snorting over here and almost tore the door down. I told him the truth, of course, but I didn't tell him everything I knew."

Lock shot me an uneasy glance. "God," he breathed, "what didn't you tell him? Let's begin with that."

"Well, I didn't tell him Hank and I had seen you in the neighborhood of Dolores street only a few minutes before the shooting."

I felt the tips of my ears getting hot under his unblinking gaze. I probably imagined that it was accusing.

"I was just going back to the Frontier," he said. "I'd been out walking."

"Hank and I had been taking a walk, too," I said. "To the Wishing Shrine. It's so quiet and peaceful there at midnight."

He hesitated only the slightest second but in that moment I sensed he was wondering whether it was a coincidence that we had seen him and whether we had noted his strange actions. "Yes," he said. "It's a pleasant walk. I often go for a stroll down there."

"You know what the cops would have done with that bit of news," I suggested. He spelled out thank you with his eyes.

"You must have heard the shots."

He nodded. "But I was some distance away by then and I didn't want to be a witness to any brawl on Dolores street. You'd have done the same thing if you'd lived as long as I have."

We were both thoughtful for a few moments. "It's a good thing you didn't appear on the scene. If they knew you were actually in the vicinity . . . well, that added to the fact that your gun killed the Mute and Dyanne . . ."

"Oh, God," he moaned again. "I can't understand it. I just can't believe it. Bucky," he said, holding my eyes with his gaze. "I haven't told this to a living soul but I want you to know. It will help, well, clarify my position. I loved Dyanne. I've always loved her, of course, as Stewart Kayne's youngster. But I finally discovered it went deeper than that. We wanted to get married."

My thoughts reeled, leaving me dizzy all over. "I hope you're not going to throw a code of morals at me," he went on, misinterpreting the cause of my shock.

"Oh, no, it's not that," I said too quickly. "You just took me by surprise." And then I remembered his feelings and my manners and said, quite sincerely, "I'm terribly sorry. Really."

He nodded. "I wanted you to know why I'd give everything I own to run

down the killer."

"What I can't understand," I went on, "is how the murderer got your gun. Haven't you the faintest idea?"

He sighed heavily. "To you, I have, Kay. But I didn't remember anything at the police station. Because it doesn't make sense. I gave that gun to Cowhide."

"Cowhide!" I gasped.

"Yes, about a week ago. I gave it to him to try out, I mean, with the view to buying it. He never returned it. But Cowhide didn't murder anybody, so what's the good of telling the cops?"

"Great Geronimo's ghost," I said, "that's all Lafe Raterlee needs. Cowhide already has a half-million-dollar motive, and put the weapon smack in his hand . . . He's a cinch for the calabosa."

"Not only that but Cowhide and a lot of other people—I have my enemies like all politicians, you know—would believe I was just passing the buck to save my own scalp. Cowhide's an all-right guy, if he'd just get that chip off his shoulder. If I say, 'I haven't the .38, I gave it to Cowhide', he wouldn't consider my point of view. He would take it as a personal thing. Think I ratted on him because I don't like him."

"I don't know what's come over Cowhide lately," I thought out loud. "When I first knew him in the university, he was a swell sport."

"That was when he was young and didn't have any troubles," Lock remarked sagely. "Before fate took hold of him and tossed him around like a tumbleweed in a desert twister. Dyanne swept him off his feet and I guess it shouldn't be held against him that he didn't have any more sense than to marry her. Any more than you should blame her for falling for a happy-go-lucky cowboy."

THAT WAS a moot point, I thought, but I kept still.

"Then he's had a run of luck at the rodeos that oughtn't to happen to a Brahma steer. This year would have seen him world's champion cowboy if his roping horse hadn't been killed."

His bad luck to date would be nothing, however, compared to the spot he would be in if Lafe Raterlee found out he had had the gun that murdered Dyanne and the Mute.

"Just where did Hank get that gun, Bucky?"

I gave him a very brief account of our encounters under Dolores street, trying to be matter-of-fact about it all.

Lock pulled at his big square chin and kept muttering, "I can't understand it, I can't understand it."

"Lock," I began after a pause, "did you ever see the Golden Burro charm of Uncle Charley's that Dyanne had in her hand when she was shot?"

"Yes. Every time I saw Charley Kayne, which was plenty often."

"You took Dy out to the Mission for the ceremony. Do you think she had it with her then?"

"Could have. But somehow I don't think so. I've been with her quite a bit since Charley's suicide but as far as I know that lucky burro went on with Charley. I've never seen it or heard it mentioned since then."

A little shudder began at the top of my spine but didn't get very far because I have no truck with ghosts and the supernatural. Yet there was no explaining how a good luck piece had gotten from a body that presumably had been lying at the bottom of the East river for seven years to the hand of a murdered young woman.

"If your hunch is right, then Dy got the charm from someone after she arrived at the church. Probably, after the ceremony, because," I said, thinking out loud again, "she had her corsage in one hand and, well, you just don't go around with both hands full. Do you suppose she could have snatched it off the murderer?"

A light tapping on the door sent me practically out of my skin. A voice said, "It's Louella. May I come in?"

I had to swallow a couple of times before I could say, 'Yes'. When she saw Lock, she stopped, startled. Their eyes met for an instant before Lock smiled a welcome.

"We were just talking about the Golden Burro," I explained, motion-

ing her to a chair. "Did you ever see it after Uncle Charley committed suicide?"

She shook her head.

"Can you remember whether he had it the day he disappeared?"

"I've been trying to think," she replied. "It seems like he did but I'm not positive whether I actually remember it or whether I just can't picture Uncle Charley without it. He had a superstitious streak. Wouldn't be without it. It was a kind of rabbit's foot to him."

I tried another lead or two but got nowhere. The same diffidence prevailed that I had sensed when the two of them and the Pinto Jones had dropped in at the Ortega House. Lock became preoccupied and Louella, strangely self conscious. Then one last stratagem occurred to me as a means of breaking the icy covering.

"Have you seen tonight's paper?" I asked Louella, and when she absently shook her head, I went on, "The murder gun was found, the one that killed Dy and the character on Dolores street. Isn't it ridiculous? It belongs to Lock."

Louella's black suede bag fell to the floor. She either forgot to cover up or didn't care. Her eyes fairly cried with anguish and as I watched I saw the expression change to one of pure tenderness.

"But, but . . .," she stammered nervously, "surely you can explain. They . . . they can't think . . ." Her voice wavered and died. She'd forgotten I was there.

"That's the devil of it," Lock told her. "I can't explain it and they do think in their patronizing way."

"But, Lock . . ." Suddenly, she became aware of me, gaping, no doubt, and stopped. "Oh, I do hope it is all right," she added quickly. "They just can't think you had anything to do with it. It's—it's too preposterous."

She got up, missed her bag and retrieved it, then turned to me. "I really must run. I just dropped in to see if there was any news."

Louella Regan didn't just go out, she fled. Lock got up to go. "Fine girl, Louella," he said unexpectedly. "Mighty fine."

WHEN SOMEONE like Lock Trayton who is not given to banalities, utters one and for no good reason, it can only be, I mused, an attempt to display his completely impersonal attitude, a disguise to hide his real feelings. That gave me pause. Lock, meantime, had made his excuses and was gone.

When mealtime rolls around, I make for the nearest eatery with the unerring instinct of a plow horse heading for the barn at sunset. Likewise, I know the route to the Frontier coffee shop so well I can go there with my eyes shut and my mind on something far off.

All through the meal I kept trying to shove the affair out of my mind. But it was no use. As I was following the waiter around the crowded dining room, vainly trying to catch his eye, my gaze raked over a half-pint character ablaze with color. It was 'Pache, of course, and I knew it was something urgent or he wouldn't be caught in a place where he had to take off his ten-gallon sombrero, thus exposing his barren dome. I stood up and motioned to him.

"I heered you nearly got kilt this mornin'," he said, after he had cased the nearby tables as though he were looking for Indians. "I thought we come to town to have a rip-snortin' time. Am I goin' to have to give up poker and the rodee-o sos't I can ride herd on you?" He cocked an agate eye on me and added, "You ain't hurt, are you?"

I was touched, really, but you don't dare go soft on 'Pache. He'd disappear in a cloud of dust and I couldn't handle the Tres Santos ranch without him. So I said, "Look, 'Pache, I'm a big girl now. If you want to hire yourself out as a nurse maid, I'll be glad to give you the best of references."

The old scout turned violet, looked around for a place to spit, and miraculously spotted a cuspidor, a relic of the Frontier's lurid past. "And, no, I ain't hurt," I added to ease the tension. "What's on your mind?"

"I been thinkin' 'bout them horse tracks disappearin' in mid air and suddenly it come to me like that," he

said. He snapped a finger so loud the waiter I'd been trying to lure came running up and I got my coffee refill.

"I figger it was this way. Someone drives out toward the Mission in a car which is pullin' a horse trailer. They takes the Injun school road and turns off onto the desert along where they's some mesquite and bushes they can drive behind. It's purt near-it dark by then, so'st they don't run much chance of bein' seen. Then the party gets out of the car, gets his cayuse out of the trailer and rides to the Mission."

It was one of those things so simple you wonder why you didn't think of it immediately. There's lots of unfenced land along the highway around Tucson and the desert floor is so cement hard that a car can safely drive off the roadway more places than not.

"It's dark when he gits there," 'Pache continued, "and the murderer jest takes a bead on his victim, forks his hoss an' rides hell bent fer leather back to his car, loads up his nag and beats it back to town."

"Could you recognize the hoof prints if you saw them again?" I asked.

'Pache shook his head. "A hoss track ain't like a fingerprint. Less'n they somethin' very peculiar about the shoe. Besides, they's about as many nags in town these days as they is cowpokes. You can't go around liftin' up all the hoofs in Tucson to find the right bronc'."

"But if you suspected the owner of a horse," I insisted, "couldn't you determine whether the hoof prints of the horse in question matched those you followed?"

'Pache scratched at his red rim of hair. "Reckon you might, maybe."

"What about the tire tracks?"

"Gol-dern it, you know how it is on the desert near a road where you can drive off. Lotsa tracks and in that particular spot, none of 'em very plain. Too much caliche."

"I'll tip Lafe Raterlee off about the horse tracks," I mused. "I suppose he can find them, if you show them to him."

'Pache bristled. "Let that old shamble bones find his own tracks," he said. But I knew he wouldn't miss the satisfaction of pointing them out to the doughty deputy for the world.

I COULD see 'Pache was getting fidgety to be off to his nightly poker routine and I told him to get moving. When I finished my coffee, I walked through the crisp night to the post office to mail my weekly letter to my brother, Bill, U. S. N. At the mail drops I ran into old Teddy Beethoven.

"Well, hello, Teddy," I greeted. "Getting that postcard off to the President?"

He backed up to look at the high wall clock and pulled his dark glasses down on his nose temporarily while he made certain of the time.

"It's got to be in by ten o'clock," he said. "The mail closes then for the midnight Golden State. That's the best mail train. Gets into Washington couple days later. Puts my card on the President's desk first thing every morning."

I wondered whether the poor old eccentric had ever heard of the President's secretary but I didn't have the heart to ask him.

"And what was your report to the President today?" I asked.

He pawed awkwardly at his beard. "Well, ma'am, I told the President how our women in Arizona are dressing these days. Bare limbs, bare backs, scarcely anything on above their . . . And in February, too."

"But the sun is hot here in February, Teddy," I reminded him.

He shook his head. "The wind is cool. I tell you, such dress is undermining the constitutions of our womanhood, breeding grippe and pneumonia and encouraging immorality. Mark my words, it will decimate our women and mothers in time and our whole race will suffer."

He tottered over on arthritic joints to pick up his battered violin case from the floor under the writing desk and hurried to rejoin me as I was going out the door. I headed for the hotel and he trudged along beside me

like a pet bear. I was not the least dismayed that this dear old fuzzy wuzzy, who looked like some character out of grandmother's fairy stories, should waddle along beside me, touching my elbow as we crossed busy Congress street. On the contrary, I'm very fond of characters because they have the self-confidence to be themselves, and I hope to grow into one myself in my old age.

I got slightly tangled up in the violin case at a corner where Teddy had to change sides to observe the conventions, and noticed that there were some new white patches on it.

"Been doing a repair job on your violin case, Teddy?" I asked.

"No," he said, a trifle surprised that I should ask, then he glanced down at the bulky carrier and changed his answer quickly. "Oh, yes. Yes, I have. I forgot. Got to keep things repaired these days."

"I wish you'd show me your violin some day, Teddy," I remarked, thinking it would please him. Actually, it seemed to scare him. He made a funny noise in his whiskers before he could think of anything suitable to say.

"Do you play the violin?" he hedged.

"No, I'm sorry to say. I can't play anything but the sweet potato. But I'm a whiz on that."

"The what?"

He thought I was kidding him. I hastened to assure him. "The ocarina. It looks a little like a sweet potato—and sounds like one, too."

Teddy walked me right up to my hotel door. I thanked him and said good night.

"Young ladies shouldn't walk around on the streets alone this late at night, you know," he added primly, as he walked off. "It isn't safe."

I smiled indulgently to myself and trudged wearily up to bed. But for some reason his last speech wouldn't let me go to sleep. There was some compelling urgency about it that kept tugging at my waning consciousness until I finally gave in and turned on the light. "It isn't safe," the voice kept insisting. "It isn't safe." And finally it dawned on me. That voice!

It was not the slow-paced utterance of an innocuous old dreamer. Those words had the edge of a warning.

I sat upright in bed. Who was this old man of the mountains anyway? And suddenly the curtain rolled back and I saw snatches of things I'd never put together before and consequently had never really seen. A violin case in a black corridor at old San Xavier the night Dyanne was murdered. An old man suggesting I go to the Wishing Shrine. Pieces of white adhesive tape on a battered old case. Dark glasses at ten o'clock at night.

Chapter XII

A WAKENING suddenly from a sound sleep, I opened my eyes, saw nothing but pre-dawn blackness, and closed them tightly again. I wiggled farther down in bed and pulled the blankets up around my ears. But I heard it again and this time I knew I wasn't dreaming that soft tap, tap on my door. "Who is it?" I mumbled through a mouthful of cotton.

"Cowhide."

"Who?" I asked, although I heard him the first time and was already groping for my old jodhpur boots with my eyes shut.

"Cowhide," repeated the hoarse whisper.

Turning on the light, I pawed around for my robe, still trying to coax my eyes open. I opened the door a crack.

"What do you want in the middle of the night?" I demanded to know.

"It's not the middle of the night," he replied stoutly. "It's a quarter to five."

"I know people who would disagree," I tossed back nastily.

"How's about making me some coffee down in the kitchen? I haven't slept all night. And the town's closed up tighter'n a jug."

"Oh, all right," I whispered. "I might as well. I won't go back to sleep now. Meet you in five minutes at the foot of the stairs."

I dressed, dashed some cold water on my face, ran a comb through my hair and made it on schedule. Looked

it, too, no doubt. I got some water boiling in the kitchen and again made coffee in a sauce pan, then rummaged around in the refrigerator for an egg, so I could put an egg shell in the coffee to settle the grounds.

"I see they're going to serve bacon for breakfast this morning," I remarked. Well, we couldn't see any excuse for wasting an egg just for the shell, and one thing led to another, and you can guess what happened.

"Bucky, for this I'm your life long friend," Cowhide said as he speared his last bit of toast with his fork, blotted up what was left of the eggs, then dabbed till he got the remaining crumbs of bacon to stick to the load.

When we had finished, I stacked the dishes in the sink. "Do you think we should leave a note saying, 'Kilroy was here'?"

The deserted lobby was dreary in the half light from a single overhead globe. We found chairs and Cowhide got out a cigarette.

"You know," he said, "the only thing I hate about rodeos is sitting around with nothing to do, waiting for the rest of the town to wake up."

"What was on your mind to keep you awake all night?"

"As though you didn't know."

My heart quickened its beat. "You mean the gun?"

"It was in the evening papers." Cowhide hit the chair arm a mighty whack with his clenched fist. "Why didn't he say, 'I loaned my gun to Cowhide and he shot her?' Why can't he come out in the open and play fair? Why does he have to act so almighty holy?"

The big chip Lock mentioned, was beginning to loom up on the strong, broad shoulders.

"Why didn't he first off tell the cops that I borrowed the gun? When they do find out, they'll think he was just being noble to protect the skin of a no 'count cowboy. Noblesse oblige, I think is the term, unless I've been out of college too long."

"But they would have clapped you in jail so quick you wouldn't have known what hit you. You must know that."

"Hell, yes. I know that. But that isn't what I mean. Why didn't he tell them I returned it?"

That cozy, well-fed feeling that had been settling over me disappeared. "You mean, you mean..."

Cowhide cut in. "Naturally, he wouldn't tell you that. As it now stands, it's just my word against his, and you know damn well whose word they'll take. That goon of his wouldn't rat on him."

"What goon?"

"How should I know. The man who opens his doors for him."

"But, Cowhide, you know Lock won't have a servant around. What are you talking about?"

"When I took the gun back to him at his room here in the hotel, some man answered my knock. I asked him if Lock was in and he said no. So I gave him the gun and told him to tell Lock I didn't want to buy it."

"When was this, Cowhide?"

"That afternoon, the day she was shot. About three, four o'clock, I reckon."

SOMEHOW I couldn't believe Lock capable of holding back any evidence that would clear Cowhide, even though it meant he would assume the brunt of suspicion. Neither, however, could I bring myself to doubt Cowhide's story.

"You haven't any idea who the man was?"

"No."

"And you haven't seen him since?" Cowhide, eyes on his worn boots, shook his head glumly.

"What did he look like?"

"Well, he was average size and sort of tanned and rugged looking, and I think his eyes were blue but they might have been light brown. Anyway, they were sort of crinkled up at the corners. And his hair was light and looked like it needed combing."

"Kind heaven, help us. Didn't you notice anything odd or specific? The way you paint him, he's a bobby soxer's dream boy."

"Well, he wasn't," Cowhide declared. "He looked like a goon. I don't know why but he did."

"What kind of clothes did he have on?"

"Dark. And I don't think they were very good."

And detectives are all supposed to be men because they are inherently more observing! "Did he have on a business suit or cowboy clothes or what? Didn't what he had on tell you anything at all?"

Cowhide shook his head. "He wasn't a banker, I don't think. I'd know him, though," he added hopefully, "if I were to see him."

"Look, no one knows you had the gun but Lock and me. Or did you mention it to anyone else?"

He shook his head.

"Lock won't tell and neither will I." I paused to ponder a gruesome picture of old Lafe Raterlee taking me apart limb by limb with less compunction than a baby pulling the gay wings off a butterfly. "That will give us a little time to find the man and prove that you did return the gun. Lock probably knows who he was."

Cowhide waited till he had gotten another cigarette going from the glowing butt of the previous one. "But you don't seem to understand. Lock won't admit I returned the gun. So naturally he won't identify the man I gave it to."

"I think you're wrong there, cowboy," I told him. "And I'm going to face him with your story. After all, what have you to lose? You couldn't be in a worse spot. And who knows," it suddenly occurred to me, "the man you gave it to might be the murderer."

"Then what was he doing in Lock's room?"

While I was groping for an answer to that one, I thought I heard a muffled movement somewhere in the mossy gray shadows of the deserted lobby. Cowhide stiffened and we both sat motionless, listening. There came the unmistakable creak of a board, then another and finally, footsteps approaching. As the thin, bony figure passed under the feeble glow of the hall overhead, I recognized Rory. She pulled up with a gasp when she sighted us.

"God love me, you scared the livin' daylights outta me," she said in a hoarse whisper which must have rustled the leaves on the University campus. "An' me tryin' to slip out without wakin' anybody up."

"What gets you up at this hour, Rory? Going out to catch a worm?"

"Goin' out to catch a bronc'," she said. "Couldn't sleep. I ain't used to the city. Noises keep me awake. Tonight I'm gonna ride all night. At least I can doze."

AS SHE strode out to the patio and headed for the parking lot, I wondered how much of our conversation she had heard, if any. Her footsteps had hardly died away when I heard another set of soft, quick ones approaching. Francie came running lightly down the corridor, looked around the lobby in an effort to penetrate the murkiness, like a nearsighted old lady without her specks. She was so startled when her careful gaze fell on us, I thought she was going to faint. Cowhide got to her in a leap.

She brushed him off with a petulant, "Oh, go away, you big ox. You nearly scared me to death."

"Well, what are you running around in your nightie at this time of day for anyway?"

"O-oh," Francie wailed like a wounded coyote and pulled her gaping robe more tightly about her. She shot me a suspicious glance and added, "I—I couldn't sleep."

"Insomnia," I remarked, "has reached epidemic proportions around here."

Cowhide stood like a park bear holding out its paws for food while Francie kept eyeing me nervously. Suddenly she stamped her foot. "Well, I couldn't," she said and her voice sounded like ice beginning to crack up in the spring. Once more, her gaze darted around the room. I couldn't see the expression on her face but judging by her tight little fists, the tautness of her body and the unsteady quality of her voice, I knew she was very close to the end of her rope.

It suddenly occurred to me, while

watching Cowhide stand there awkwardly in silent supplication, that Francie was the only answer to his persecution complex, the only one who could bring him out of himself.

I got up, walked over and put an arm around the girl's slender, trembling body. "Go up stairs and try to get some sleep, dear. Everything's going to be all right."

Her hand as she gave mine a little squeeze was wet with perspiration, yet cold as ice. Without glancing at Cowhide, she grabbed up her long robe and ran up the steps toward her room.

Outside, darkness was fighting its losing but tenacious struggle with the oncoming desert sun. And soon, I suspected, events would be crowding events like befuddled cattle in a stampede. I prefer ordinary days myself, filled with little homey problems that I can cope with, such as a blown gasket on the Delco or snake bite of a horse to break. There was a strange foreboding in the grey slanting light creeping into the patio that presaged a day I didn't look forward to with pleasure.

I turned to Cowhide and sighed audibly. "I wish you could see yourself from where I stand."

He looked at me solemnly. "What would I see?"

"A very lucky cowboy with the world by the tail. Only it will take one more mighty heave. So does he heave?" I wagged my head broadly. "He just lets go and poof! It's all gone."

I left him with that to chew on, went upstairs and tapped on Francie's door. "It's Bucky," I whispered. I had my hand raised to knock again when the door finally opened a crack. She took my arm and pulled me in like a drowning person grasping a life preserver. There wasn't a remnant of the poised, self-assured Frances Crandell of rodeo fame left. Her contorted little face was faintly reminiscent of a surrealist's portrait in which the eyes have run. I must be getting hysterical, too, I thought.

Without saying a word, she sank down on the dressing table stool and reached for a bottle of some sort of

make-up. The stopper tinkled in her nervous fingers, then the jar clattered to the floor, and its contents ran out on the rug, filling the room with the sticky, sweet odor of honeysuckle. Francie flung the stopper at the mess on the floor, hit the bottle and broke it. Her head buried itself in her arms on the dressing table as though released, puppet-like, from a taut cord.

I STOOD awkwardly watching the little demonstration. It was so unlike Francie I couldn't decide which technique to use on her. Relying on the old axiom, when in doubt, keep still, I walked over and put an arm around her and patted her hand. Nervous sobs shook her body and her breath came in short, uneven gasps. At last, like a scared kitten, she put a cold, wet hand on mine. Gradually, her breathing became more regular but her voice when she spoke was a little out of control.

"I—I can't ride today. I'm afraid. I feel as though I couldn't sit my horse."

That from Francie was like expressing doubt in her ability to walk. "Of course you can, foolish," I told her. "You've got to." I knew she was in line for the grand prize in fancy riding, an award which would put her in the running for the world's championship at the end of the season.

Francie slowly shook her tousled head. "A few days ago, I wanted that championship so bad I'd have ridden a wild horse with my leg in a cast. Now it all seems silly, childish. What does it matter whether one Frances Crandell becomes the world's champion fancy rider?"

"That's defeatism, darling, and unworthy of you."

Carefully placing the silver-handled nail file she had been toying with on the dressing table, she turned around to me. All trace of her former hysteria was gone. In the first instant that she fixed her eyes on mine, I caught a flash of something that stopped my breath, froze the words in my throat. For tragedy appeared there, fleeting but clear, like a face in the window, then vanished.

"I suppose no one can feel the other person's feel," I told her, when I finally found my voice, "and maybe I don't understand. But, Francie, it does seem to me that if you and Cowhide . . ." Her eyes stopped me.

She regarded me in silent misery, then said, "God knows I'd help him if I could. But I can't—not the way you mean."

I realized, somehow, that Frances wasn't being stubborn or heroic. Still, I didn't get it.

"You wouldn't understand, Kay," she went on, reading my puzzlement, "because you have never loved anyone the way I loved Cowhide. You couldn't have, because you had two normal parents—until you were grown, that is—and a brother and you've lived a perfectly normal life. There's never been anyone in my life but mother and Cowhide."

She paused and I noticed the sparkle of tears which she struggled to ignore.

"I never knew my father. He died before I was born. Mother worships him to this day. She's tried to make me his daughter. It's almost as though he were some sort of god and she his prophet.

"He's a beautiful character but unreal. And mother, well, I don't know how to tell you. She's given her life for me and I'd do anything for her. But we're so different. She's a pioneer woman. She's had it so rough. Horses to break, land to fence, coyotes to kill, cattle to brand, me to bring up. She gave me education and culture, because she thought that was what my father would want but it—it cut a chasm between us. I worship her but I don't understand her.

"But Cowhide, he was something I could tie on to. He was simple and dear and all I wanted in this world."

FRANCIE broke off suddenly as though she had been talking in her sleep and had just awakened. Tears welled up in her eyes and she bit her lips in an effort to still her quivering chin. "I—I don't know why I tell you all this. I know it doesn't make sense to you. It doesn't even to me."

"Never mind," I said, "I'm glad you told me. You just leave things to Grandma Johnson."

"It's too late now. There's nothing anyone can do." She was starting to cry again. "I just wanted you to know I would help Cowhide if I could but I can't. It's too late. Too late."

She threw herself on the bed and gave up to unrestrained sobbing. I tried to reason with her but it was no use. "Go away," she implored. "Please go away now and let me cry."

Confused and downhearted, I returned to my room. Blue ribbons and prize money and championships did seem, as Francie had said, relatively unimportant just then.

Pancho met me at the door with a hearty "yeow". When I failed to notice him, he sat up on his big jack-rabbit hind feet, with his shoulders hunched down, in a very disgusted manner which seemed to say, "This is a very idiotic and unfeline gesture but a man's got to eat." He even put out his right paw and when I didn't "shake hands", punched me gently on the shin. Mechanically, I got up and gave him a hunk of liver and a milk chaser. Then I called Lafe.

"Mornin', Bucky," he said through a yawn. "I reckoned it was 'bout time for you to horn in. What is it now?"

I said sweetly, "Oh, nothing. Nothing. Thank heaven, I don't have anything to do with this case. I just called to ask you personally whether it's true the Sheriff is firing you tonight or is it tomorrow? Hank wanted to run the story along with your latest picture in *The Bulletin*."

"There ain't a word of truth in it. Why, you tell that . . ." Lafe sputtered violently, then, like a defective match, went out. His tone, when he finally spoke again, dripped with false sincerity. "This is a mighty tough case to crack. Been workin' night and day practically single-handed. But I've always got time for my little buckaroo. What's on your mind?"

"Why, Lafe, darling," I gurgled. "That's the first time you ever called me that."

"Whatta ya mean?" Suspicion fla-

vored his sincerity.

"Why, always before you've called me your little 'bird-brained' buckaroo. I believe you're beginning to care."

Lafe made a loud ceremony of spitting.

"If you're sure you have time," I went on, "I do have something you might use."

"Such as what?"

"You know those horse tracks you set your hounds on right after Dy's murder," I began delicately. "Well, you ought to fire those dogs and get yourself a pack of old Indian scouts. Pache picked up the trail of a horse going at a dead run from the Mission, through the desert to a spot near the Indian School road. There they disappeared."

"A-ha. Lost 'em, did he," Lafe chorlted but his satisfaction was short lived. I explained Pache's theory of the horse trailer, and the old sheriff, never one to cut off his nose to spite his face, finally decided to have a look at the country.

"All I can say is," he added just before hanging up, "it sure is open season on wild geese when you blow into town. This here chase better produce some results."

Chapter XIII

IT WAS a brittle day, full of sharp contrasts—hot sunshine and cool shade, dazzling light and sharp, black shadows. And the air had that mountain-top headiness that is sheer intoxication.

As I waited on Congress street for Hank, I felt wonderful—for the first half hour, that is. But as time rolled up an hour, my feet began to hurt and I became conscious of obnoxious people pushing me around. I stepped back into a recessed doorway and began aimlessly surveying the contents of the showcase. It contained one of those revolting displays which every city should have an ordinance against. Acres of plaster-of-paris feet, ghastly in their whiteness, with big-toe bunions the size of watermelons; assorted corns; high, medium and low fallen arches, and leperous-

looking patches of athlete's foot, done in red to scare little children.

When I glanced up from this horrendous art gallery, there was Hank grinning down at me. "Good morning, lamb chop," he said in his most cajoling voice, just as though he weren't an hour and ten minutes late.

"Look at that window," I told him. "That's how my feet feel, only worse. Bunions, fallen arches and all."

"Careful, gal, the eyes are green this morning."

"You bet, they're green. And don't call me gal."

He said he was sorry, and put on his hurt act, which could get the blood pumping the heart of a con man, and I felt as though I'd kept him waiting an hour and ten minutes. He led me around the corner to his old crate which was parked in the only available space, alongside a fire plug. He looked slightly disappointed that there was no cop leaning on it, writing out a ticket. His journalistic immunity to parking citations seems to give him delusions of power.

"How's about running me out to Pinto's place." I asked after he had coaxed the old can into high. "I made like I was interested in one of his nags but actually I want to trade more than a horse."

"Look out, Pinto," Hank said, "here we come. What has the poor guy done to bring you down on him?"

"I just have a hunch that that hombre has overplayed his cards-on-the-table technique."

"How come?"

"Well, Louella went out of her way the other day to alibi him."

"But he has a perfect alibi. Didn't she meet him at the train?"

"That's just it. Why did Louella fly to his rescue the minute I mentioned the question of alibis?"

"Hum-m," Hank buzzed. I knew he was starting the mental mechanism up. "Just leave it to your Uncle Henry. I've got a question to ask the gentleman."

About a mile out on North Stone avenue, he nosed the car into a drive-

in and ordered root beer from a slick chick in blue satin pants that gave the appearance of painted skin. From the guilty glance she wafted my way, I think Hank winked at her. Over frosted mugs, we exchanged notes.

"The cops are stumped," Hank said. "That rat hole down on Dolores street is deserted. No one anyplace. No sign that anyone's even been around there recently."

I remembered I wanted to get hold of Lock Trayton and surrendered Hank to the blonde car hop long enough to make for the 'phone booth. Maribelle, the switchboard girl at the Frontier, wasn't able to locate him in the hotel and if Maribelle, whose insatiable curiosity accounts in large measure for her efficiency, couldn't locate him, it would be a safe bet Scotland Yard couldn't either.

"Hank, what do you know about old Teddy Beethoven?" I asked when I returned from making the call.

"Oh, he's just an old character. Been around here for years. Nice, inoffensive old guy."

"How many years?"

"Oh, off and on for the last five or six, at least. Why?"

"Well, I know it sounds ridiculous but I think he has something up his sleeve about this case."

"Now, Bucky, remember your imagination."

"Them's fightin' words, podner," I retorted hotly. "If a big square-jawed man detective uses his imagination, the results go by the manly titles of hunches, ideas, brain storms which crack the case. Intuition is fine—so long as it isn't feminine."

Hank grinned. "O. K., lamb chop. You're not only beautiful but you're sharp. Now lower the hackles, please."

"Well, all right. But I'm still mad. Anyhow, about old Teddy, did it ever occur to you that I stumbled over a violin case out at the Mission the night Dy was murdered and that it was Teddy who suggested I go to the Wishing Shrine and that's how we happened to see the Mute shot?"

"Probably just coincidence."

"Could be. Anyway, I didn't connect it until last night when he persisted in walking me home . . ."

HANK MADE a clucking noise with his tongue. "Wait'll I get my six gun," he said. "I'll learn that old vulture bait he cain't take my girl home."

"And just as he was leaving," I continued, smarting because Hank refused to take the situation seriously, "he warned me."

"Hank, I think he deliberately invited me to lunch that day to sound me out and to tip me off about Lock going to the Wishing Shrine."

"But, why?"

I shook my head. "I can't imagine. Of course, it could be just coincidence as you say, but the Mute was shot that night and if it was a little Papago's violin case I stumbled over in the dark corridor at San Xavier, why was it gone when I looked out a few minutes later? And where did the blood come from if I didn't get it on my fingers when I felt of the violin case?" The memory of that small but unmistakable dark red smear on my fingers as I reached for the 'phone still chilled me.

"Anyway," I continued, "I want you to get me the dope on Teddy. Where he came from and what he really looks like. You can some way, can't you?"

Hank paid off the slick chick in the blue tights and headed leisurely out on Stone avenue before he answered. "Well, I suppose I could send Sally out to get a feature story on him. He might not go for it but anyway Sal could ask a lot of questions. She's good at that. But she couldn't yank out his whiskers, my sweet. That's asking too much even of a newspaper woman."

"Has he always worn that mask of shrubbery on his face?"

Hank nodded. "Ever since he first came here."

Avoiding busy Oracle road, Hank continued north of Stone. We rode in silence until the neat little stucco houses began to dwindle out, showing the Catalina mountains bold and blue and looking as though they were just behind the next roll of desert.

"I'll bet old Charley Kayne could solve this if he were here," I mused.

Hank slowed down to turn into Pin-

to's place. A broad cattle guard stretched between two volcanic rock pillars which supported a rustic arch bearing the sign: LUCKY CORRAL. The white gravel road was lined by sahuaro cacti and prickly pear and wound a quarter of a mile back through the desert growth. Presently we came upon a wide, cleared place with gay umbrellas and yard furniture and a long, gleaming-white stucco house whose red tile roof looked too low to accommodate a six-foot man. Hank pulled up under a pepper tree. We got out and walked across the bright winter rye lawn toward the inviting porch.

"Careful," said Hank, "this hombre's as slippery as a mess of spaghetti."

Hank lifted the iron bar attached to the old triangle which served as door knocker but held the blow in mid-air. The door flew open so suddenly that the iron all but connected with Lock Trayton's aristocratic nose. Lock's face was the picture of unrequited fury and our presence didn't in the least alter it. He chewed off a brief greeting and started on.

"Oh, Lock," I called to his retreating back, "I've been trying to get hold of you for hours."

He stopped but didn't turn around. "Will you be in the hotel in about half an hour? I've got to see you. It's very important."

"Make it ten thirty," he said, and again took up his long, fast stride. His voice was still quivering with rage.

INSIDE, Pinto stood like a recalcitrant school boy after submitting to a beating. He didn't say anything as Hank and I walked in. Finally he shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

"After the storm comes the rainbow," he said. "Sit down and pull up your pot of gold. I could use it."

"Whew," I groaned, "what in the world gives? I've never seen Lock so—so violent."

Pinto motioned us to charis and sat down on a wide Indian drum which served as a coffee table. He tapped out a cigarette and got it going before he answered. Again he

shot us his disarming grin. "To tell the truth, Lock is a swell guy and I'm a cad. Just a no 'count heel. Only difference between me and all the other cads is, I admit it. Everything open-and-above board, that's Pinto Jones."

The little glint in Hank's eyes told me he was laughing to die inside but he had on his professional newspaperman's face, compared to which a poker face is an open book. I knew what he was thinking, however: Go ahead and ask him what he and Lock were quarreling about. Old Open-and-Above-Board Pinto would, if he were you.

"Do you have to work very hard at being uninhibited," I asked Pinto, "or does it just come naturally?"

"With me, it just comes naturally. One advantage in not having parents. They start all your inhibitions. Don't do this; it isn't nice to do that. Old Lady Experience is the only one who dictates to me."

"Oh, then, you do admit to an occasional inhibition?"

"An occasional."

"I can see that this conversation could become very interesting," I told him, "but unfortunately I'm just a slave to the conventions. I wear, for instance, shoes, contrary to my every instinct and wish . . ."

"Except at movies, concerts and between dances," Hank interrupted.

I gave him a scathing look. "And I'm on time and keep appointments, which reminds me, I came out here to see a horse."

"I'm sorry about that palomino I told you about but I can't show her to you today. Fact is, I had to take her to the vet's. Developed a bad foot and she's too valuable to neglect." He stole a peek at the hall clock.

I gave him my glamour-girl smile and said, "That old lady must have dictated that one. But I can't possibly imagine why."

Hank raised an eyebrow. Tally one for you, it said.

"Come to think of it, I can't either," Pinto readily admitted. "I think I'll strike that off and say instead, I haven't got time to show you the damned horse this morning. I like

you two very, very much but I do wish you'd both get the hell out of here."

My mouth dropped open in momentary surprise, so I left it open and laughed. Then I got up. "Some day when you're not so busy," I said, "I want to come over and take some lessons. I've often wanted to say just what you did."

At the door Hank said casually, "By the way, I hear you've been East. Have a nice trip on the Cochise Flier?"

"Swell."

"They tell me those new streamliners vibrate so much some people can't stand to ride them clear across the country."

"Why, that's crazy. The Cochise was smooth as silk. You can get on in New York and go straight through without changing now, you know. Had a swell trip."

IT SEEMED to me Pinto slowed thoughtfully to a stop but there was nothing in his forthright manner, as he saw us out, to indicate he was on guard. As soon as we were out of earshot, Hank whispered, "He walked into my trap, all right. He wasn't on the Cochise all the way because the one he purports to have arrived on had a slight wreck. Ran into a freight in Kansas in the middle of a soggy corn field. The passengers had to walk about a mile around the stalled freight to a place where another train was backed up to take them on. The story rated only a paragraph here, on account of all the rodeo news. But the Kansas City papers gave it a pretty big play."

"Wonderful," I said. "Now I've got something to trade. You wait here. I'm going back and see Mr. Frank-and-Open."

I knocked sharply, pushed the door open and poked my head in. Pinto was making more noise than I and obviously didn't hear me. He was standing in the little hall back of the living room with a tan sport shirt in his hand, shouting, "Paco, Paco-o," and swearing eloquently. Finally I managed to out shout him.

"Oh, hell, Bucky, I thought I got

rid of you." His tone wasn't bantering or pleasant.

"There seems to be a little unfinished business. It won't take long, depending upon you. You didn't come in on the Cochise all the way from New York as you said, you saw Dyanne before she was shot, otherwise you wouldn't have gone to so much trouble inventing an alibi. Do you want to tell me why or let the cops ask you?"

He looked at me in genuine amazement, opened his mouth for a reflex denial, then closed it again.

"Good decision," I said. "You had the reservations all right and got off the Cochise in Tucson but if you had been on it in the East, your swell trip would have been spoiled by a train wreck. So-o, to go on with the story, you rushed back to put the bee on Dy for money. You've already admitted that."

He sat staring at me, coldly, calculatingly, figuring the cards in his hand. He could have ordered me out of the house but he didn't want to anger me—he was smart that way—and have me call up the bloodhounds. So he tossed in a couple of chips and pretended they were all he had.

"I flew to El Paso," he said. "Tom, my top hand, met me with the trailer. I wanted to pick up a couple of horses but when Tom told me the wedding was the next day, we drove straight home."

"And then when Dy got herself murdered, you desperately needed an alibi. So you boarded the Flier as it pulled up to the station and pretended you'd been on it all the way?"

"I did better than that. I went down the line to Willcox the next day after Dy was murdered and got on the Flier. I sent Louella a wire and she met me."

"When did you meet Dy?"

"I 'phoned her the minute I got into Tucson the first time and she came right out here. That was the night before the shindig."

"The wedding?"

"Yes."

Dy wasn't one to put herself out. Therefore, Pinto must have had some powerful bait. "And you told

her if she didn't come across, you'd mess up her plans?"

PINTO gave me a venomous glance and pretended to look into space. Actually, I knew he was looking into the face of the wall clock. "You knew," I said, smiling sweetly, "that Dy was planning at that time on collecting her inheritance, wiggling out of her marriage to Cowhide, and picking up Lock. So you threatened to tell Lock what a promiscuous little tramp she is, and she knew if you did, Lock never would marry her because his wife's got to have clean skirts or the politicians will smear him all over this state. Maybe you even threatened to tell Cowhide because if Cowhide had had all the facts about her, he could have skipped that silly ceremony and gotten a divorce that she never would have dared to contest. Okay, Pinto, did she fork over the ante?"

"No, dammit, she didn't." Pinto's anger came out in a clenched, quivering fist. "She was plenty anxious to the night before the wedding."

"How much?"

"Fifty grand—but something happened. The deal went pfft."

"That's tough. How come?"

"I still don't know. She gave me the old stall that she didn't have it sure she did. She was just counting eggs till Uncle Charley's chickens hatched."

"When and where were you to collect?"

Pinto squirmed and shot me a furtive glance. "Look here, I don't like your tone of voice. I had that money coming to me. Legally. Her father was my father and her uncle, my uncle. Anyway, she was going to bring it to me before noon the next day. Said she'd have to wait till the banks opened. I figured she was going to put the touch on Lock. She didn't come, though, and long about twelve-thirty, I got hold of her on the 'phone. She said the deal was off. I could shout my head off if I wanted to."

"So you offered the dirt to Lock?"

"Hell, no. I figured if Dy didn't care if I told, either Lock knew or it

no longer made any difference. Well, it no longer mattered. She told me she was taking Cowhide for keeps this time. 'Till death do us part,' she quoted. Death sure didn't wait long, did it?"

Chapter XIV

OUTSIDE, I took a good, deep breath of clean, desert air and reveled in the penetrating sunlight. Maybe it could sterilize the malodorous taint that seemed to cling to me after that talk with Pinto.

"Get out of here quick and to the nearest telephone," I told Hank.

"Well, it's about time. I was fixing to come in and get you. The Old Man will be having kittens. Black and white ones with lavender eyes."

I hardly knew what he was saying. Pinto's revelation had set off a veritable mental explosion and ideas, like tiny sparks, were shooting off in all directions. Why had Pinto Jones taken such elaborate pains to establish an alibi that wouldn't be doubted? I could see nothing quite that incriminating in what he had told me.

"Hey!" Hank was shouting. "You can come to, now. There's a telephone." He nodded to a roadside cafe.

I gave the operator the number of the Sheriff's office and told her to rush it. Lafe, I was informed, was out. "Who is this, Frank?" It sounded like Frank Cratchen's drawl. It was. "Do you think Lafe would mind if Pinto Jones left town without leaving a forwarding address?"

"Hell, yes," Frank roared. "The Sheriff'd eat us all alive and spit out the bones."

"Well, you'd better get out to Pinto's place and explain the matter to him. And maybe you'd better send a man to the airport just to make sure."

Hank drove straight to the Bulletin office with the purposefulness of a homing pigeon and I had to walk rapidly the few blocks to the Frontier to make my ten-thirty appointment with Lock. I found him prancing about his room like a wild horse in a tight corral.

"I think this case is ready to break

wide open," I began.

"What makes you think so?" he asked before I was through.

"Oh, straws here and there. When a big thing composed of a lot of little parts begins to crack ever so slightly, it falls to pieces in a hurry. What's the matter, Lock," I asked impulsively, studying his grave, expressive face, "are you going to get hurt when it does?"

His intense scrutiny seemed to penetrate my innermost thoughts. "Look here," he said unexpectedly, as though coming to a sudden decision, "let's put our cards on the table. Yes, I'll probably get hurt. But I want to see this thing cleared up. Do you know who did it?"

"No," I said, "I don't. Do you?"

Lock Trayton sighed heavily and shook his head. "Lock, I saw Cowhide this morning. He admitted having your gun and all," I added, watching him carefully, "but he swears he returned it."

Lock's head snapped up and if he wasn't genuinely amazed, he registered a facsimile of amazement. "He didn't give it to me," he said positively.

"No, he claims he gave it to a man who came to the door of this room."

"When was that?"

"The afternoon of the day Dyanne was shot. Cowhide couldn't give a very good description of the guy." Lock's face was a mask, his eyes wide and uncomprehending as I related the encounter according to Cowhide. Finally, he said, "I can't understand it. Who could have been in my room?"

"You don't recognize him?"

"No. No, I don't. Who on earth . . . ?" Lock studied his fingernails a moment, then got out a cigarette and rolled it around between his fingers nervously.

"Think back. You must know him. It's important. That man might be the murderer."

"It's no use. I tell you I don't know anyone that description fits."

"How can you be so positive?" I hurled at him. "You know hundreds and hundreds of people and with a hazy description like that, there

ought to be a dozen people it might fit."

"I'll talk to Cowhide about it," he said slowly. "See if I can't make something out of his vague description. It's just that I can't think of anyone who'd have any business in my room."

"O. K., Lock, do you want to put any more cards on the table?"

Lock smiled. "Got any more up your sleeve?"

"A few. How about you?"

"Well, I'll do my best to match yours."

I TOLD him about my recent interview with Pinto. I suppose I shouldn't have but I wanted to do some trading. "Did you know," I asked him, "that Dyanne intended to stay married to Cowhide, always?"

Lock looked out of the window at the sun-dappled Catalinas for a time before answering. When he did, his voice was a soft whisper. "No, I didn't. I don't believe it."

He got up and began pacing the room again. Finally, I prompted him, "All right, Lock, it's your turn now. You said you'd match my cards. What were you so mad at Pinto about this morning?"

It seemed to take him a moment to focus his thoughts on that. "Oh, Pinto," he repeated. "It really doesn't have anything to do with—with Dy's death. I trust you won't repeat it?"

He turned his gaze full on me, waiting for an assurance. "Certainly not," I told him, "if it hasn't anything to do with the case."

"Pinto's a born gambler. He'll go for anything if the stakes are high enough. He got into a jam in the East. No use to go into the details of it, and he had to write a check for forty-one hundred to hush the affair up, keep out of jail."

"And why did that make you so mad?"

Lock frowned and appeared to pull out the reply against his will. "Because he signed my name to the check, not his."

I gulped. "You mean he forged your name to a check for four thousand dollars?"

He nodded. "Just between you and me, Bucky, I think Pinto is a little off. He does things like that without the slightest feeling of guilt. It just isn't normal."

"Did the check go through?"

"No, sir! He took the bit in his teeth once too often. You see, he wrote the check in New York, then flew part way here in order to beat it back. That's why I say the guy is loco. He had the nerve to tell me about it, so I would honor it!"

I didn't think I could be surprised at anything Pinto Jones might do but that was unbelievable. "You mean, he thought you'd honor the check rather than press charges?"

"Fantastic, isn't it? I'd helped him out before, swearing each time that it was the last. This time, however, I meant it."

"So that's it," I said, as the light began to filter in. "That's why he was in such a hurry."

Lock shot me an apprehensive look. "What do you mean?"

"He's clearing out," I told him. "But I don't think he'll make it. Lufe's after him."

The cattleman looked miserable. "Maybe I should have honored the check. I don't like to see anyone get into trouble."

"I can't conjure up any great concern for a cheap blackmailer," I said.

Lock came to a sudden halt in his pacing and for the second time, gave me a long, penetrating stare. "What do you mean by that?"

"I may not be very old or very bright," I admitted, "but to be perfectly frank, Lock, I'm not dumb enough to think Pinto Jones would sign your name to a hunk of dough that size without being pretty sure it would pay off. Even a gambler, and a crazy one at that, has to have something to go on."

"All right, suppose he thought he did. I didn't consider it worth buying, did I? You don't have to take my word for it. Wait till that phoney check hits the bank."

I sighed and got up to go. "I wish you'd believe me, Bucky," Lock added. "Pinto has nothing to do with Dy's murder."

"How do you know?"

"My dear Kate," he said, smiling down at me, "I wish you'd quit stalling and marry that newshound of yours and raise a family. It might take your mind off murders." Then he added, in a tone that denoted the interview was ended, "How's about going to the rodeo with me this afternoon? Sit in my box?"

"Oh, I'd love it," I said. I stole one last look at him before closing the door behind me. His face had simply fallen apart. If I hadn't known Lock Trayton so well, I'd have sworn he was afraid.

Lock, being grand marshal of the rodeo, seated me in his box and left immediately for the parade line-up. He had no more than gone when old Teddy Beethoven strolled up, carrying his battered violin case in one hand and a decrepit fiddle in the other. His long white hair was parted on the side and hid the brown velvet collar of his frock coat in the back. He pretended pleasant surprise at seeing me. Lock's box was empty except for me, so I told him to come in for a minute.

HE ACCEPTED gratefully, letting his shaded eyes run over the wide expanse of the Catalinas, lying restfully like so much blue and lavender powdered chalk on the northern horizon. Then he turned his arthritic body around to look at me. It always annoys me for anyone to look at me through dark glasses. It's like talking to someone behind a wall.

"Do you know, Miss Bucky," he began, "I sat on the bleachers many years ago in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and watched Teddy Roosevelt prance around the rodeo field on a big dappled mare. Ah, those were the days. Great man, Theodore Roosevelt." Mr. Roosevelt's namesake sighed wistfully.

"When was that, Teddy? I didn't know any president ever rode in a rodeo."

"Back in nineteen ten," Teddy replied with the nimbleness of memory of the aged. "Yes, sir. It was at the Cheyenne Stampede. Didn't participate. Just a guest. He was a great

rider, though."

"Don't tell me you used to be a cowboy, Teddy," I quizzed.

"No, not professionally. Oh, I've done a little of everything in my time, including ranching. But mostly prospecting. Always looking for gold and never found any to speak of."

I was acutely conscious of his appraising eye upon me from behind the curtain of those dark glasses. "That's too bad," I said.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. I've spent a long, carefree life roaming over the most beautiful part of God's earth, talking to people when I felt like it, and reading good books when I didn't. I knew a prospector once, poor like me. Then he made a strike—lots of money. He was never really happy again. There's a moral there, child."

My heart leaped with excitement. Was old Teddy trying to tell me something?

Further conversation was drowned out, however, by the fanfare announcing the start of the grand march. A noisy band spat out the *Star Spangled Banner* in assorted tempos and the crowd roared. Lock Trayton, looking resplendent and dignified at the same time, carried a great American flag and rode his famed black horse. Then came cowboys and cowgirls, entrants in a score of events, interspersed with clowns in regulation plaid shirts and voluminous white trousers. A cheer went up from the crowd as Frances rode by, waving her sombrero and smiling her patent smile.

Many of the contestants gave samples of their skill in roping, whip cracking and the like as they passed in review. One cowboy came flying down the sawdust, his body synchronized to the pounding feet of his racing pony. As he approached the judges' stand, which was next to our box, he began a series of acrobatics, bouncing from the ground to the pony's back and then to the ground on the other side with the speed and ease of a beam of light. Then suddenly the crowd gasped, rose to a man. The bouncing ball of a cowboy lay limp and lifeless on the dirt track

while his pony brought herself to a stop and returned to nuzzle his still body.

A siren screamed and Dr. Crosbee, the rodeo physician, ran to the rider's side. I was so near I could see the physician rise from his preliminary examination and shake his head. Two white-coated figures disgorged from an ambulance and picked up the gaily-clad cowboy. The holiday mood, from that moment on, was gone. Once more the blare of music sounded and the show went on. But it wasn't the same. Perhaps the traditional superstition of show people conveyed itself to the audience.

WHEN I again thought of Theodore R. Beytower, the old philosopher was gone. After the rodeo got well underway, Lock came over for a brief chat. He reported the cowboy was in a critical condition with a fractured skull.

"Must have got in the way of his pony's hoofs," Lock said glumly. "That act was no more to that cowpoke than skinning a cat is to a ten-year-old. When things get too easy, you're apt to get careless. Poor devil."

"I suppose everyone's all broken up," I remarked.

Lock nodded. "Softest-hearted people on earth. They have their differences and their squabbles but they stick together like brothers. If one cowpoke loses everything he's got, even to his saddle and hand-made boots, those who have won prize money will bail him out. This poor devil didn't have a dime in his pocket but he won't have to worry about his hospital bill. And if he dies he'll have more friends and flowers at his round-up than a city hall full of aldermen."

Lock sniffed a couple of times, then blew his nose loudly. "They're nervous," he said. "Look at the time they're taking. Breaking all the records—the wrong way. Twenty-eight seconds to rope a calf. Why, I've seen Everett Bowman tie one in ten."

"How long will this go on? This nervousness, I mean."

"Till the show's over tomorrow,

maybe. Or till there's been three accidents. They think bad luck goes in threes. They're just waiting for what they consider the inevitable. Well, my act's coming up. I'd better be on my way."

"Do be careful, Lock," I said so earnestly that he patted my hand and laughed at me.

"Now wait a minute. We're not superstitious, you know. Not you and I."

"I'm not really superstitious," I agreed, "but I believe in taking every precaution just in case there is something to it."

I had no need to worry, though, for Lock came charging out of a chute some time later on a bucking bronc' which did everything but turn wrongside out, much to the delight of the crowd, and Lock stuck like a burr for the required ten seconds. Francie, too, performed with such ease that her consummate skill was greatly minimized. But nobody, it appeared, was taking any chances by playing to the galleries.

Anxious to get back to the Frontier when the show ended, I caught a ride to town with acquaintances and didn't wait for Lock. The 'phone was ringing when I entered my room. It was Hank. He was coming right up, he said, and I could tell from the suppressed excitement in his voice that I would get no immediate rest. I barely had time to change and put on a new face.

When I opened the door for him, he was anything but the triumphant, devil-may-care reporter who has just gotten a scoop. His face registered excitement but under a heavy white-wash of frustration. Heaving himself down in a deep chair, he said without his customary grin, "I think I'll quit the newspaper business."

"Oh, serious, eh? Come on, tell mamma."

"If the Old Man finds out, I'll be kicked out. I have here," Hank began, tapping his head, "the most sensational scoop that has hit this town in many a day. But I haven't the guts to break it."

"Why?"

"Because it's dirt that's been

plowed under for over ten years. If the person is innocent, it would—well, it would just about ruin her.”

“And to think,” I mumbled, “there are times when I wonder why on earth I love a certain newshound. Come on, darling, I’m simply dying.”

Hank fumbled in a preoccupied manner for his pipe, filled it carefully, then forgot to light it. Finally, he began his story. “Sam, my friend in New York, ’phoned this afternoon while you were at the rodeo. There wasn’t much going on in June, 1935, except the depression and the old Chronicle was a scandal sheet anyway. There isn’t much doubt about what our mysterious informant would have us know—the Chronicle carried a banner line about a hold-up murder. Sam went through the rest of the paper and there wasn’t anything else he thought pertinent.

“This case wouldn’t have rated much space except that the victim was a wealthy playboy and besides, the story has a heart tug.”

I interrupted. “Hank, who was it? I can’t stand the suspense.”

“I don’t know.” He stressed the last word. “But I can guess. I want to see if you figure it the way I do. Her name was Rita Fallan, but that means nothing. Here’s what happened. On the night of June 28th, a man named Roger Thyler was shot in his exclusive New York apartment. His butler reported that a man purporting to be from the British Museum had arranged for the loan of a valuable collection of antique jewelry. He admitted the man around nine o’clock in the evening. A few minutes later the butler heard a shot, ran into the library where the men had been and found Thyler dead in front of the open safe and, of course, the jewels gone. He ran to the door, managed to get the license number of a disappearing car. It was picked up right away and in it were a man and his wife and the jewels.

“The butler identified the confidence man and he was eventually found guilty of first degree murder and put to death. Sam dug that out of the Chronicle morgue. Seems the guy

was a smooth worker from a way back and had been sent up before. But he was always a lone wolf except for some dame. And there’s where the story really begins.”

I had been listening breathlessly. “You mean the woman? What did they do with her?”

HANK SUCKED on his unlighted pipe and frowned in annoyance at it. “The girl—his wife, that is—gave her name as Rita Fallan Harris. Harris was the alias the con man was going under. She swore she knew nothing of her husband’s criminal record or inclinations. She insisted he was an antique dealer who kept very irregular hours, and that on the night of the shooting, he asked her to drive him to see a client. He was leaving immediately on a train to consummate a big deal and told her to keep the motor running, as he would be only a minute and would have to rush to catch the train.

“Sam dug up the whole story. Seems the girl—she was only nineteen—went completely to pieces during the trial and was placed in a sanitorium. She couldn’t prove her innocence although she came from a good family and had never been in trouble.

“She was convicted of being an accomplice with a recommendation of leniency. The judge gave her a suspended sentence because she was about to have a baby.”

“Oh, Hank!” I gasped.

“You haven’t heard the bad part yet.” Hank champed at the stem of his pipe and at long last discovered it wasn’t lighted. After taking care of it, he continued, “The baby was born in a pauper’s ward—an idiot.”

I had become so absorbed in this bit of stark tragedy that I had almost forgotten about the murder of a selfish, spoiled brat and a cheap renegade down in Dolores street. Yet some angle of Rita Fallan’s tragedy must coincide with the murder set-up at old San Xavier or some character fit one in our cast. Because somebody who knew had sent me the note with the date. It wasn’t hard to figure, by the simple process of elim-

ination.

"Louella!" I whispered. And Hank nodded soberly.

Chapter XV

"SAM IS sending a picture he swiped from the photo morgue," Hank said. "But there's little doubt. I did a little checking myself. Rita came from a little town up in Connecticut—Gilmore—and so did Dy's mother. And Fallan was Mrs. Kayne's maiden name."

Hank leaped out of his chair and started pacing the floor. "I can't print it," he kept repeating. "I can't do it. And pretty soon the Old Man will demand to know why I spent his money on a 'phone call to New York and I can't tell him, because he'd lap it up."

"Darling, I love you," I said, hugging his arm. "I think you're just as noble as William Allen White."

But Hank wasn't listening. He was talking to himself. "Maybe Louella—Rita, that is—was innocent all the time. I have a hunch she was but then I'm just a sucker. Or maybe she was guilty as hell. Anyway, the way I figure it, she's paid up in full. Besides, she hasn't been charged with Dyanne's murder and I'll be hanged if she goes on trial in any newspaper I'm connected with."

I threw my arms around him and kissed him on the ear. It didn't register, so I landed one where it belonged. "Darling," I said, "will you marry me?"

"Huh?" he said, dazedly. But he put his arm around me tightly and kissed me.

"And we'll raise a lot of little newspapers," I went on, "and we won't print the names and pictures of people before they're charged with anything."

"And they'll all die in infancy," Hank finished flatly, "of malnutrition and poverty."

As we sat in dejected silence, working over our own particular thoughts before pooling them, Cowhide dropped in on the way to his room. He had stepped out of his outlandish clown's costume but the dust of the

arena clung heavily to his thick eyebrows and dulled his mop of bright curly hair. He came into the room, dragging his high heels the way all cowboys do, stood in the middle of the floor fidgeting with his stetson and couldn't think of anything to say. He was probably wondering why he had barged in and wouldn't have admitted he was just a miserable cowboy who didn't want to be alone with himself.

We talked briefly of the accident and its effect on the performers.

"Lock was the only one who didn't appear nervous," I told Hank. "He surely sat a wild one and didn't turn a hair."

"Sure he did," Cowhide drawled scornfully. "Didn't you recognize that cayuse? He was a Tom Thumb—a bucker. Lock always draws them—makes him look like a world champion and the crowd goes wild. But there isn't a spill in a car load of that kind of a nag. They're rodeo wise."

Eager to reroute the conversation, I told him about my talk with Lock. Cowhide couldn't resist saying I told you so. "He wouldn't admit getting that gun back if I'd given it to him in person."

Nevertheless, he went over the description of the man in Lock's hotel room for Hank's benefit. It was exactly as he had recited it to me.

"What did the guy say," I asked, "when you gave him the gun?"

Cowhide thought a moment. Finally, he shook his head.

"Didn't you ask him when Lock would be back or anything?"

Cowhide's forehead furrowed up in mental maneuvers but to no avail. "I just can't remember what he said, Bucky. Honestly, I'm not being dumb. Intentionally, that is. I simply can't . . ." Suddenly he stopped and stared at me full on and a peculiar look came over his face. "By gad, I do, too, remember. He didn't say anything."

"What do you mean?"

"He just shook his head and looked at me with that goon look of his. And when I asked him if he would see that Lock got the gun, he nodded."

"The Mute!" I gasped. "It must

have been the Mute! Why didn't I think of it before?"

We all looked at each other in startled silence. "But what," I thought out loud, "could he have been doing in Lock's room? Hank, you saw him. Does the description check?"

HANK NODDED. "But it won't take long to make sure. I got a mug shot of him from the morgue but it was too gruesome to print."

We all grabbed our coats and went streaking over to the Bulletin office. Unlike his vague description, Cowhide's identification was positive enough. "Well," he muttered glumly, "there goes my alibi, dead and buried and six feet under the ground."

Back at the Frontier, Cowhide said, "Well, I'll be going now. I want to scrub the dirt and horses off me and have a good feed. They say the showers and food are both cold over at the jail house."

'Pache was waiting for us on the balcony overlooking the lobby, his gnomelike figure almost hidden by the deep leather chair which housed him. We went up to my room.

"Old Cactus Nose Raterlee figgers you're holdin' out on 'im, Bucky. Are you?" 'Pache wanted to know.

"Well, yes, a little," I admitted. Hank let out a big "Haw." I glared at him. "Let him go around and get his own information. Besides, he hasn't asked me."

"Heaven help you when he does," Hank said.

"If I knew who killed Dyanne, Lafe Raterlee would be the first person I'd tell. And that salves my conscience, selah."

We talked for a while of the puzzle of the gun mix-up.

"You've got to scratch Lock," Hank pointed out, "or the horse get-away, one of the two."

"Not necessarily," I said. "As I see it, either someone in the wedding party hired the Mute to do it and then silenced the Mute, or someone not in the party did it and the Mute found out about it. Lock, for instance, could have loaned his trailer and a horse to the Mute. We know Lock had some connection with that character since

Cowhide found him in Lock's room."

'Pache interrupted with, "There's bad blood there. Maybe Cowhide's framin' Lock."

I shook my head. "Cowhide's not the conniving type. And Dy's sudden decision to stick to Cowhide and not marry Lock gives Lock a possible motive, even though he denies Dy ever had such intentions."

"Naturally he'd deny it if he actually had murdered Dy," Hank pointed out. "Besides he lied about the Mute being in his room."

"I think Lock is an eligible suspect," I went on, "but one thing certainly stands out in his favor. No one in his right mind would give his gun to a paid killer to commit murder, then use the same gun to murder the killer, and later let it conveniently turn up."

"She's shore got somethin' there," 'Pache declared.

Hank wasn't completely convinced. "All the same, he knows something. Wonder if he knows about Louella?"

"Dyanne probably took care of that," I said. "I think Lock and Louella were once in love and that Dy broke it up."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because for all her brittle exterior, Louella can't cover up her feeling for Lock. She's still in love with him. It explains her diffidence, embarrassment actually, when they're thrown together. And Lock obviously doesn't return her feeling. If Dy didn't tell on Louella, she used Louella's tragic past as a threat to make her lay off Lock."

'Pache bit off a hunk of rough cut viciously. "Female women!" he muttered.

"Well," Hank declared, "if Louella did shoot Dy, I don't blame her one bit and there isn't a man jury in this country who would. And she did have the opportunity, you know."

Yes, I knew. Louella had the best of motives and no alibi at all. We had only her word that she was walking up on the Mount of the Holy Cross during the ceremony at San Xavier.

"Speakin' a motives," 'Pache put in, "how about that cowpoke, Cowhide. By takin' a bead on that Dy wo-

man he was doin' hisself and everybody else a favor. They oughtta be a bounty on females like her, like they is coyotes."

HANK SHOOK his head. "Cowhide isn't the murdering type, 'Pache. If he were, why did he wait till the wedding ceremony to bump her off?"

"To collect his bounty," 'Pache answered quickly. "They was a half-million-dollar bounty on her, remember?"

"And because he learned that Dy wasn't going to get a divorce as she'd promised," I said. "At least, that's what a prosecuting attorney would say."

"He could have, at that," Hank said. "He claimed he signed a paper refusing any part of Dy's fortune, but no one can find it. Either he or Louella could have fired the shot, in which case the running horse was purely coincidental."

"But what happened to the gun?" I objected. "Lafe searched the entire area and all the cars and everything and there wasn't a sign of it. That's one reason I hold out for the murderer escaping on the running horse."

"Well, maybe so," Hank admitted, "but I still say it'd be a wonderful ruse to distract attention from the murderer."

We fell into a thoughtful silence for a time. Hank was the first to voice his thoughts. "From a standpoint of motive, Francie technically is in the identical spot with Cowhide."

"Yes," I agreed. "Francie and her mother."

"But Rory has an airtight alibi."

"There ain't no such thing," I quoted. "However, Lafe Raterlee hasn't been able to pick any holes in it. Rory attended the meeting of the Rodeo Association of America, which lasted until long after Dy was shot. She made some sort of little speech. And Francie was one of the recording secretaries for the session. They've both got a couple of hundred alibis."

"That Francie is a mighty purtty rider," 'Pache said. "She coulda rode

out there, on that female varmint an' never even hurried."

I had had the same unwelcome thoughts but I couldn't bring myself to voice them. "I admit Francie had a powerful motive. With Dy planning to stay with Cowhide always, Dy's death was the only way Francie could ever get Cowhide."

"And the five hundred thousand pieces of foldin' money," 'Pache added.

"However," I pointed out, "any motive or reward you tack on Francie goes for Rory, too. And I, personally, wouldn't want to be on Rory's hate list, as Dy certainly was."

"And I wouldn't want to have Pinto Jones mad at me, either, for that matter," Hank added.

"No, but he doesn't have a motive that I can see."

"When you've read as many newspapers as I have, lamb chop, you'll learn that hate is motive enough. A guy gets mad enough to kill somebody—and does."

"I know, I know," I agreed. "But not Pinto. He wouldn't turn his hand unless there was something in it for Pinto Jones. Why should he shoot Dy so Cowhide could inherit?"

'Pache, who had been fidgeting and looking at his wrist watch—evidence of the insidious encroachment of the gadget age—got up and headed for the door. "I ain't interested in this case a-tall," he lied. "Gotta put on the feed bag and git goin'."

"Just a moment," 'Pache," I said. "You've seen old Teddy Beethoven around, haven't you?"

"Yep."

"Ever hear anything about him? Any of the oldtimers know him?"

'Pache scratched his head. "Nope. Can't say's I have."

"Ask around among those card-shark cronies of yours, will you, and see if you can get a line on him?"

'PACHE nodded and went noiselessly out. "You know, a crazy idea has been chasing itself around in my skull," I told Hank. "Old Teddy has been around here for something over five years. Seven, maybe. Does that suggest anything to you?"

Hank gave his knee a whack. "Uncle Charley?" He gasped, incredulously, then, as the idea began to take roots, he muttered, "Dear Aunt Claribel's ghost!"

"Of course, it's just a remote possibility," I went on, "but it has such interesting possibilities. Just pretend now that Uncle Charley got tired of his plushy existence on Fifth avenue and decided to fake a suicide in order to go back to the old days when he was just a poor prospector but happy. After he had been declared legally dead, he could come back and have a lot of fun playing God."

Hank let out a long, low whistle. "Fun? He could have a field day. He could even shoot a few people he didn't like and no one would suspect. Ye gods!"

"Well, I don't know about that. You're ahead of me there. But he could have whispered in Dy's ear just before she was remarried, say, that if she didn't behave and go back to Cowhide, he'd come to life and take back his half million bucks. She got a 'phone call, you know, just before we left for the church that put the fear of God in her."

"And the gold nugget—the Golden Burro. You know, that thing they found in Dyanne's hand. That would explain how it got there."

And that rang a bell somewhere in the back of my brain. Two of them, actually. The first registered a quick montage in which an old violin case in a black corridor dissolved to a close-up of my blood-smeared fingers, then back to the corridor again, now dimly lighted and empty. And quick on the heels of that came the memory of an odd lunch with old Teddy in which he suddenly disappeared. It must have been because of the approach of Lock, Louella or Pinto Jones. But which one?

I recalled the incidents to Hank, adding, "One of the three must know the old man under all that quaint camouflage and he bolted because he feared discovery. Funny, I never thought to kid him about it. It was so in keeping with his eccentric character."

At that point the 'phone jangled

and we both leaped as though we'd been fired upon. It was Lafe and he jumped right into an irate tongue lashing. Omitting the adjectives, it boiled down simply to the fact that Pinto Jones had skipped.

"Why didn't you tell me that wrangler was fixin' to clean out?" he wailed. "But oh, no, you wouldn't do that. You have to send me on a wild goose chase lookin' at horse tracks."

"You flatter me, Lafe, dear," I answered, "but I'm really not a mind reader. You just imagine I am. I told you just as soon as I knew."

"You told me just as soon as I got outta town," he bawled at me. "Wouldn't s'prise me if you helped 'im pack."

I had hardly banged down the receiver when the 'phone rang again. This time it was for Hank. His end of the conversation consisted mostly of yeahs, O.K.s and a-huhs but even those monosyllables betrayed his excitement.

"It was Louey," he said when he put up the receiver. "He got his grapevine working. The Mute was running with desperadoes who would smuggle anything from a Chinese merchant to a shovel of snow into or out of Mexico. They had had a financial backer up until recently when he pulled out. You can guess who he was."

Chapter XVI

THE NEXT day around ten I ran into Lock in the hallway. He asked if he might talk with me a second and we went to my room. His hands were as restless as a bear's paws. They played with his Stetson, tugged at his boots and repeatedly brushed through his hair.

"I wish to God there were words strong enough to make you drop this business," he said.

His tone startled me. It was insistent, threatening and ominous all at the same time. He was asking me to quit—more than that, demanding I pull out. Always before he had pretended he was so anxious to track down the killer.

"What do you mean, Lock?" I

asked.

"Simply this: There's a murderer among us and he isn't through. He can't be as long as he's in danger of being caught. Can't you see that? You're in the gravest possible danger."

"You know who did it." I didn't ask him. I said it for the truth I knew it was. I plunged on. "You knew the Mute, didn't you, Lock?"

"Yes, yes," he said impatiently. "He worked for me once at the ranch. We had a little business deal recently and he got sore."

"The Mute was in your room when Cowhide returned the gun."

Lock shot me a hard, questioning look. "My room? The Mute? Could be he was waiting for me. To talk business. Maybe he got tired and left. I swear I didn't see him that day. I didn't know he was the one Cowhide gave the gun to."

"I beg of you," he said, brushing by the subject of the Mute, "go back to the Tres Santos ranch while there's still time. Not tomorrow. I mean right now."

"I'll make you a bargain," I told him. "I'll wash my hands of the entire matter this minute if you'll go to Lafe Raterlee and tell him all you know."

Lock sank into a chair and pressed his fists to his temples. "Oh, God, what can I do? You don't know what you're asking."

Our little conversation was interrupted at that juncture, practically before it got started. It was ended by a loud pounding on the door, the kind you expect to be followed by the command, "Open in the name of the LAW." Rory's voice came through, however, and it said, "Miss Johnson. Ka-a-ay. Are you in?" The tidal-wave quality of Rory's voice generates in me the same reaction I have to a stuck automobile horn in traffic. Anything to get it off. By reflex action, I jerked open the door. On sober contemplation a moment later, I wished I'd pretended I was out.

She started to speak, saw Lock and froze so quickly that her voice caught one foot in the air. The break was

only momentary, so swift that she finished the word, walked over to a chair and dumped herself in it. "'Morning, Lock, she said tardily. Irritation flooded Lock's face and after a moment's hesitation, he excused himself and left.

"You're a friend of that fool sheriff," Rory said abruptly. "Will you tell 'im my Francie didn't shoot Dy-anne Kayne?"

"That's ridiculous," I told her. "I don't think Lafe really suspects her."

"Then why is he snoopin' aroun' tryin' to make her look guilty as hell, gettin' her best friends to tell a bunch of lies."

"What do you mean, Rory?"

She lowered her voice to accommodate a small auditorium and said, "He got Mary Briggs on the carpet and another girl that was takin' notes—secretaries, they was, like Francie—and he browbeat 'em into sayin' Francie left durin' the rodeo meetin'. About the time the killin' taken place. I tell you, it's a damn lie an' I want you to tell that there fool sheriff it is."

Rory was dressed smartly, in an outfit Frances obviously had chosen for her. She looked almost handsome, except that she held the trim matching felt hat in her hand and her wiry black hair branched off in all directions as usual.

"Do you mean Frances doesn't have an alibi for the time Dy was murdered?"

"She don't need one, I tell you, 'cause my Francie didn't do it. She was at the rodeo meetin'. They're just lyin'."

Tears sprang out of the ranch woman's fiery black eyes. She did nothing to check the flow. She only beat her knotted fists on the chair arm and kept repeating, "My Francie didn't do it."

"Well, Rory," I said gently, "if Francie actually has no alibi, the smart thing is to face it. If her two friends admitted she left the meeting, she probably did. Did you ask Francie?"

Rory shook her head miserably. "She wouldn't stand up for herself, not if she thought it would harm

Cowhide."

"In other words, you know it's true and you don't want Francie to corroborate it. You were there, you would have seen her yourself if she'd been there the whole time."

Rory, considerably calmed down, got out a handkerchief and rubbed hard at her face and blew her nose. "What good would my word be? Sure, I'll swear she was there all the time. Do you think Lafe would believe me?"

"Were you there all the time?"

"Sure, you're damn right I was."

I watched a shaft of bright morning sunlight, which streamed through the old over-sized keyhole, break as somebody walked by it in the hall outside, then jump into line again.

"It's no good, Rory, and you know it. Where did Francie go?"

"I don't know. Oh, God, I don't know. But she didn't do it."

"She probably can explain where she was," I said without conviction. Because, if she had slipped out, why hadn't she admitted it from the start? In getting the girls to cover up for her, she had only made her own position extremely suspect.

I HAD BEEN fixing absently on that shaft of light as I turned these thoughts over in my mind, when I noticed that the stream of light no longer shone through. It was some moments, however, before it suddenly occurred to me why it was cut off. I got up with what naturalness I could summon, moved noiselessly to the door and threw it open. Squatting on the floor like a praying mantis was Lock Trayton.

"I dropped a cigarette butt down here somewhere," he said. He whipped the words out with an alacrity possible only to a prepared explanation. He got up hurriedly, leaving the imaginary butt to burn the hotel down, and disappeared down the stairs.

Turning back into the room, I caught Rory putting her face back together. Had I not glimpsed the vestiges of terror in her eyes, I'd have ascribed the shakiness of her voice to recurrent hysteria. She implored

me, "Please see Francie and talk to her. Please. She won't listen to me. She—she don't see things my way always."

"Of course, I'll talk to her."

"And to Lafe, too." Her voice was rising to a shrill scream. "I'll confess to the murders myself. Maybe that's what I should do. If they so much as lay a hand on my Francie . . . Sure, I'll confess. That's what I'll do."

I walked over and took a good firm hold of her scrawny shoulders. "For heaven's sake, Rory, don't go off half-cocked. The worst thing in the world you could do, is to lose your head. They'd think Francie did it sure."

A dazed, feral look came into her eyes and she fell silent. Finally she nodded and got up to leave. She walked awkwardly to the door and said, "Nothing must happen to my Francie, understand?" I reassured her and she disappeared into the hall.

Although I made a concerted effort to find her Francie, I was unable to track her down and came to the conclusion that she must be intentionally avoiding me. How she slipped through my net and out to the rodeo, I'll never know, but the next time I saw her she was flying by in the grand march. I was sitting with Hank in the press box and she brought her mount to a stop before us and made it kneel while she doffed her sombrero.

A capacity crowd packed the grand stands and boxes, and clamored noisily for the fast action, spills and thrills that characterize the world's most dangerous sport. And for the most part, the spectators got it.

As the afternoon wore on, however, a series of minor mishaps drew the pall of yesterday's accident more tightly about performers and crowd alike. Lock Trayton stopped briefly at our box to report that the tension back of the chutes was mounting.

"Suicide day, they call it. But don't print that," he hastened to add. "Every 'poke that forks a bronc', you'd think was volunteering for a suicide mission. If two more accidents do happen today, it'll be because they're nervous and not be-

cause an arbitrary fate has written it in the books like they think."

Regardless of the cause, that same fear of tragedy possessed Lock Trayton. He wouldn't have admitted it, of course, but his scoffing was only a mask which failed to cover the lines of anxiety in his face. Besides, he took off at a run without the usual amenities when the Brahma bull riding was announced.

To us rodeo followers, the announcement is hardly necessary. We know when we see all unmounted cowboys, judges, stray dogs and hangers-on suddenly leave the arena by the nearest possible exit, that the most dangerous animal in rodeo is about to be loosed. A cross between the Brahma cattle of India and the wild long horn of Mexico, he is bred for meanness, and only the most formidable are chosen by the rodeo scouts. Put two thousand pounds of pent-up, vicious strength behind a six-foot span of horns, dangle a bell under his belly to make him mad and top with a cowboy. That's the dish which quite understandably clears the field.

IT ALSO throws an anticipatory hush over the audience. "Watch chute number three," the loud speaker blared. "Bill Dinlevy coming out on Atom."

As though merely riding a charging bull with nothing to hold on to but a rope tied about the animal's middle were not enough, mounted judges stood by to see that the poor, harried cowpoke kept one hand free and that he spurred the Brahma from shoulder to flank during the eternity of the eight seconds needed to complete the ride.

Cowhide, in pink shirt and baggy, yellow-and-black-plaid pants, stood in the center of the arena. He held in readiness a large red bullfighter's cape to divert the Brahma's attention when the cowpoke was ready to dismount, and he dragged a two-hundred-pound dummy as a substitute for his own body in case the bull decided to charge him. Several other clowns materialized for this event, and heavy iron barrels, veritable

bomb shelters to ward off the death-dealing horns, were rolled out.

Suddenly the gate numbered three flew open, banged back against the board fence, and the snorting, kicking, bucking, wriggling bull charged out to the accompaniment of the tinkling cow bell. The crowd stood breathless. The Brahma gyrated and went wild but little Bill Dinlevy sat him, waving his pancake with his free hand and spurring till the signal sounded for the completion of the ride. Then he sprang free. The rodeo-wise bull made a few half-hearted charges at clowns and horses before heading to the wire pen at the far end of the field. The crowd breathed again.

There was a short wait before the next contestant shot out of the narrow chute. The tawny ton of sinew, hoofs and horns ran several yards, stopped dead, whirled, bolted this way and that with body-wrenching twists in a vain effort to unseat his rider. Then, with head lowered, he charged, sending the nearest clown scurrying for the iron barrel. Again the crowd was standing. The Brahma stopped dead, fell to the ground and rolled over. Dust mushroomed into the air. When it cleared a second later, the Brahma's four legs still were flailing. The cowboy, obviously injured, seemed tied to the ground. Before our horrified gaze the Brahma regained his feet, made for the cowpoke, who had providentially landed a few feet away, and it was then, I remember, that the gun sounded, announcing the end of the eight-second contest.

It all happened in the flash of an eye. Clowns, red capes waving, rushed toward the bull but they were too far away. Mounted cowboys, at the risk of their lives and their ponies', closed in on the animal. But they were too late. As the dazed rider scrambled to his feet and started to limp away, the bull, bent upon destroying his annoyer, was upon him. With a savage tilt of his head, he aimed a horn, deadly as a rapier, at the horrified man. I heard a low roar but I don't know whether it was the bellow of pain or the battle cry of the

animal. I watched till I saw the inert body of the cowboy being scooped up on the horns of the bull, then I closed my eyes.

When I dared look again, the body of the cowboy lay on the ground and the Brahma was charging a huge dummy held upright by Cowhide. At exactly the moment a long horn shot out to gore the dummy, Cowhide ran as far as he dared before looking back. Again, the crowd gasped. The bull was upon him. Deftly, Cowhide unfurled the long red cape, dodged, brandished the bright piece of cloth, and ran. Ages dragged by while he zigzagged toward the big steel barrel. At long last he neared it and with one last thrust of the cape, he dropped it and leaped in.

The bull charged the barrel sending it spinning first one way, then another. By this time a score of riders were in the arena. Watching his chance, one managed to get a rope over the Brahma's head. The bull charged the horse but another rope landed in the nick of time about one of the flying hoofs. Gradually the mounted cowboys began to close in.

THE WAIL of a siren jerked my attention back to the injured contestant, who by this time was surrounded by a ministering crowd. White-livered interns carried him on a litter to the ambulance. Not far away another little drama was being enacted. A group of cowboys, clowns and a few riders were pulling Cowhide out of his barrel. In the crowd I noted two women who belatedly materialized in my distracted consciousness as Rory and Francie. Francie leaped off her pony and was at Cowhide's side as they lifted him wobbily to his feet. The grandstands cheered lustily as he ambled off the field.

"I want to go home," I told Hank as I sank wearily into a chair. I felt completely spent, as though I had been climbing giddy heights for hours on end without resting.

"I've had enough for one day, too," he said. "But I can't leave. I've got to cover the wind-up for the paper."

Barney Ralls took his Speed Graphic out of his face, laid it on the broad desk and slumped down on his backbone. "Whew," he breathed, "I haven't had a workout like that since Okinawa." Some reporters grabbed for 'phones and the others began arguments over how it had all started.

Meantime, the band got underway with a noisy number in a misguided attempt to restore normalcy and after a brief interlude the show went on. The trained mule act was thrown in to make people laugh and get their minds off the tragedy but the crowd seemed reluctant to smile again. Next came an exhibition of trick riding and at long last the saddled bronc' riding contest was announced. It began badly. The first contestant was unable to get out of the chute. Came a long wait while others were readied and finally the feature event of the afternoon was announced — Lock Trayton riding the outlaw, Satan.

The loud speaker announced the impending advent of the famous rangeman in suitably imposing tones three mounted judges appeared and suddenly Lock and the outlaw came out of the three-foot chute as though by jet propulsion. If Lock had picked an easy mount this time, as Cowhide had accused, it was certainly not evident to me. The bronc' came out on rigid legs as though riding on stilts.

With consummate skill Lock manipulated the single rope which served as a rein, slackening or tightening it as the animal reared or lowered his head.

Satan went through his entire bag of tricks, pitching, rearing, bucking, jumping first on stiff front feet, then on hind, and reacting generally like a bundle of animated bed springs. Lock, in the manner of all qualified bronco riders, had caught the rhythm of the frenzied animal, an intuitive feat necessary to sticking on. Then without warning, something went wrong. Lock completely lost his balance and hung crazily on the side of the pitching horse for one horrible moment. Quick to sense his advantage, the animal lunged out,

Chapter XVII

shaking and bucking.

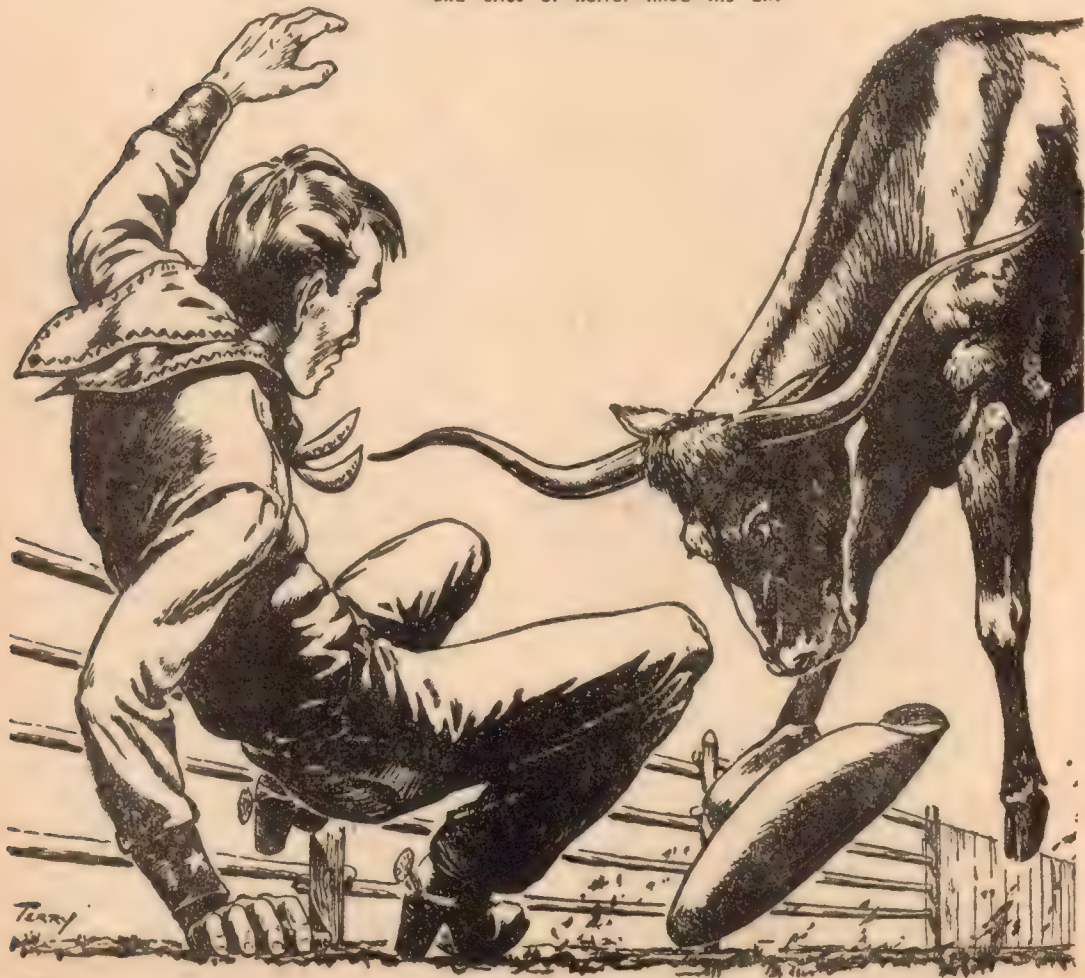
At the first inkling of trouble, all hands on the field—cowboys, guards, clowns, everyone—rushed toward the outlaw. Almost before they had started, the bronco began jerking and kicking to free himself from the thing that had tried to tame him. In horror, I watched Lock fall heavily and the horse go down on top of him. The bronco, first to gain his feet, reared up in fury and brought his pounding hoofs down on the helpless, struggling body.

After what seemed ages, the 'punchers stopped the animal by sheer force of numbers. The cycle of three had been completed.

LOCK TRAYTON died an hour later despite the efforts of physicians, the unvoiced prayers of cowhands and judges alike, and in spite of his own indomitable spirit. Dr. Crosbee, the rodeo physician, pronounced death due to severe shock and internal bleeding.

While Hank and I waited for the dread news, I rounded up 'Pache and sent him to examine Lock's saddle and hang on to it. And when I caught a glimpse of old Lafe Raterlee, I told him what I had done. He went streaking off in a huff and said he would tend to me later.

With a savage tilt of his head the infuriated Brahma rushed down upon the stunned figure of the puncher, and cries of horror filled the air.



The announcement of Lock's death left me completely stunned. Even when I saw him broken and bleeding, it didn't occur to me that he could die. He seemed so sort of indestructible. Hank took me back to the hotel where I sat, oblivious to the early evening darkness, full of fearful, horrible thoughts and self recriminations, until a knock on my door startled me. Lafe Raterlee called my name.

Stripped of his cockiness, the old Sheriff shuffled over to a chair and sank wearily down. He looked long and penetratingly at me and said unexpectedly, "Maybe you're right, maybe you're right."

Maybe. That word kept creeping into my thoughts. Maybe Lock had known who the murder was. Maybe he had been protecting someone. Maybe he just got careless and had an accident. Hadn't he said only the day before that the best of them got so used to their perilous performances that they became neglectful. But I never could get by the possibility, maybe he got murdered.

"They never was a horse that couldn't be rode," Lafe Raterlee was quoting, "and they never was a cowpoke as couldn't be thrown."

"Especially," I put in, "if the saddle strap is worn through."

'Pache had run down Lock's sad-



dle immediately and gone over it for clues with Indian cunning. Aside from noting the cause of the accident, a strap worn through where it looped over the metal ring, he found nothing. But the fact that a strap could be worn on a saddle which meant life or death, seemed significant to me. A saddle to a bronco rider is of the same importance as secure wires to an aerialist. For this reason he is allowed to use his own saddle, usually one specially designed for the purpose.

Lafe Raterlee pulled at his nose. "It's dern strange, I admit. But there ain't nothin' to prove it didn't just naturally wear through."

"And there's nothing to prove it wasn't worn thin with some kind of a rasp in the hand of the murderer—and there's a good deal more sense in it. You know darn well, Lafe, that Lock Trayton, of all people, wouldn't go out on a wild horse unless he believed his saddle was in perfect condition."

"All right, 'spose Lock Trayton was branded for the last round up as you think. How could the murderer be sure his plan would work? If some skunk filed the leather thin, how'd he know it wouldn't bust when they was puttin' it on the cayuse. Answer me that. And how'd he know it would bust a-tall?"

I had been asking myself the same questions and I gave Lafe the answers which, after much mental testing on my part, seemed logical.

"Maybe the murderer wasn't in a hurry. Maybe he weighed the advantages of his scheme against the need for speed and decided it was worth a try. Because if the strap didn't break, he wasn't out anything and he could try again. On the other hand, if it worked, there would be no possible way of proving it was murder and no way of tracing the murderer.

"By the way," I added, "did the medical examiner bear out Dr. Crosby's verdict?"

Lafe nodded glumly. "Kay, why are you so dead set on this murder idea? Do you know somethin' I don't?"

My face lighted up in an incrimin-

ating blush and I couldn't have denied it had I chosen to. However, I was completely cowed by Lock's death and my mad at the well-meaning old Sheriff faded into a pigeon hole marked pettiness.

"I think the main thing that makes me suspicious is the little talk Lock and I had this morning. He knew something, Lafe, and he was, well, all torn up about it." I told him of our interrupted conversation. Lafe just sat there thinking and chewing on a much-used toothpick he had fished out of his vest pocket.

Finally he said, "Asked you to pull out, eh?"

I NODDED. Then I opened up and unloaded everything I knew on his drooping shoulders—everything, that is, except Louella Regan's tragic secret. He listened in silence for the most part, asking a question now and then. After I had finished, he sat and chewed on that dinged toothpick until I wanted to climb walls.

"Way you tell it," he said at last, "it sure looks like Lock's number was up. Reckon it wouldn'ta been hard to git to his saddle, what with all the cowhands and people runnin' around back of the chutes. Say! That there horse thief Jones is still at large and he and Lock had a big fuss this mornin'."

Yes, Pinto dressed in conventional garb with a pancake stetson pulled low over his eyes could have walked about unnoticed.

"True," I admitted, "but several others could have gotten to the saddle and not been noticed. Cowhide, Frances, Rory. And old Teddy Beethoven goes about with the freedom instinctively granted old characters."

Lafe's wrinkled brow smoothed out. "You mean that crazy old fiddler?"

"Yes, but he isn't crazy. Just a rugged individualist. He always pops up where there's a murder," I added.

"What about that Miss Regan?"

"Louella? Well, she certainly would be conspicuous around the chutes. I'll see her later, though. Find out if she has an alibi."

Lafe shook his head. "I can't go

stickin' my neck out. Lock Trayton was a big man. Important. Done a lotta good to a lotta folks, big and little, too. If I was to stir up a hornet's nest over his death and nothin' come of it, I'd be run off the force. On the other hand, if I don't do nothin' and it turns out he was murdered, I'm done for. And after fifty years a deputy sheriff in these parts." Lafe's voice became a plaintive wail. "Nope, I've gotta have more to go on."

"O.K.," I said. "I'll get it for you."

He looked at me skeptically, put away his toothpick and ambled out a few moments later without a word. It seemed to me the fragile hold he maintained on the string that held his skin-encased collection of bones together, was weakening by the minute.

I dabbed disinterestedly at my face and hair and walked down to Louella's room. After a long wait, a muffled voice asked, "Who is it?"

"Bucky," I told her. "May I come in?"

She opened the door and motioned me to a chair. "You're the one person in this town I would let in now." She didn't look anything like the Louella Regan I knew. She was as disheveled in appearance as her emotions were out of control. She made no effort to stifle the occasional sobs that jerked at her breath and her eyes were red and swollen from crying. I walked over and put my arm around her and didn't say anything for a while.

"He was the last one," she said so softly I could scarcely hear her. "Now there isn't anybody."

"You have loved him for a long time, haven't you, Lou?"

She shot me a genuinely surprised look, then nodded. "How did you know? I didn't think I wore it on my sleeve."

"Not on your sleeve, exactly. Eyes, would come closer. But I didn't mean to spy."

"It doesn't matter. Nothing matters, now." Suddenly she jerked around and a desperate, frightened look crept into her eyes.

"I was glad when Dy was mur-

dered. Do you hear? Glad. Because with her out of the way, I thought I had a chance. As long as she lived . . ." Louella caught herself.

She might as well have gone ahead and said it—that Dyanne was blackmailing her, threatening to expose her unfortunate past to Lock.

"She was a devil, Kay. Better for Lock that they both died than that they married."

AFTER a thoughtful silence, she continued. "There's nothing for me to live for. I wish to God I could jump out of a high window. Do you know what it means to live an entire life full of nothing but heartbreak and frustration? But, no. You wouldn't."

I was embarrassed and didn't know what to say.

"But I can't . . . I can't on account of . . ." Suddenly she threw her head back and laughed but it quickly got out of control and ended in hysterical sobs. "I was just thinking of that poem, 'I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul'. That's a laugh," she finished brokenly. "I haven't enough control over my own life to end it."

I wanted to tell her I understood, yet I couldn't deny her any little consolation she might find in the belief that no one knew of the pathetic, mindless child of hers. And Louella isn't the type of person you toss inane protestations at. So I sat awkwardly silent for a while, then I put on my best practical tone of voice and said we would both feel better if we had something to eat. Over her mild protests, I had some coffee and some sandwiches sent up.

"I'm sorry I let myself go like that," she said after a silence. "I won't go hysterical on you again." She ate her share and it helped to restore her to her old self. So much so, in fact, that I got up the courage to return to the subject of Lock's death.

"Tell me, Louella, did it occur to you that Lock's accident might not have been an accident at all?"

She drew in her breath so suddenly, she choked a bit and shot me a

sharp glance. "What on earth are you talking about? Didn't you see him thrown and pounded by that horrible animal?"

"Then you saw it, too?"

She just kept looking at me as though to read my thoughts, without a hange of expression. At last she nodded. "I don't know why I went. I loathe rodeos. But I was going crazy here. Nothing to do but mark time when every minute that passes . . . Bucky," she said, suddenly recharting her course, "I've got to have money. Got to. A—a life depends upon it. I suppose it would sound phoney to say that someone who's dependent on me needs a costly operation. But it's the God's truth. Everything," she added bitterly, "sounds phoney—every explanation I give you. Sometimes I'm tempted to invent a lot of convincing lies."

I reached for her hand. "Maybe I understand better than you think," I told her, thinking of that poor idiot baby of hers. Only, ye gods, it would be a child of ten now. "Anyway, I do believe you."

She looked at me again out of those intense, penetrating eyes, as though weighing my trustworthiness. She smiled a little. "Dy took everything I ever had, my time, my freedom, she even took Lock. Why I let her doesn't matter. I had to, that's all. But I made up my mind that she would pay for it. Not with her life. I didn't kill her. I mean pay with money. Plenty of good hard cash.

"Call it blackmail, because that's what it truthfully was. I knew enough on Dy to stop her marriage to Cowhide—to keep her from collecting her inheritance. She never went out with a man that I didn't keep a record of it. She never carried on an affair that I didn't know every detail. I followed them. Knew the hotels where they stopped.

"Anyway, I made her sign a cash settlement with me for fifty thousand dollars, contingent upon her getting the inheritance from Charley Kayne."

"Fifty thousand!" I repeated as a cover for my thoughts which ran something like this: Lou hated Dy and didn't trust her out of her sight.

Could she have shot Dy—she had the perfect opportunity—before she could wriggle out of the cash settlement? And possibly murdered Lock because he knew she was the killer? I couldn't see Louella in the role of Lock's assassin yet . . .

I COULDN'T help looking aghast at her. Something resembling a sneer tugged at her mouth. "You don't believe me, do you? Well, I don't know why I thought you would. It is fantastic. And," she added, "most incriminating. However, it happens to be the truth. It isn't the first time fate's tricked me and it isn't the first time my story has been doubted."

She walked over to the bed and took her purse from its hiding place under a pillow. "Here," she said briefly, handing me a piece of paper. It was a promissory note signed, "Dyanne Kayne," written in a spidery, elongated hand as though it had been hurriedly dashed off.

"I'm sorry, Louella," I mumbled. "You must see how it is. I want to believe you and I want to believe Cowhide and Francie and her mother but—but Dy's dead and now Lock. I don't know what to believe."

She spoke bitterly. "Anyway, I'm glad you didn't pretend."

I stood up to go, groped for something to say, muttered, "I . . . I . . .", a few times in false starts and finally fled. I felt like a good swimmer taking leave of a drowning woman but what could I do?

As I passed the Crandell room, I acted upon a sudden impulse and knocked. Rory opened the door a crack, put her finger to her mouth and let me in. Francie was in bed and reminded me of a child slightly delirious with fever. Her eyes were dry and too bright and darted restlessly about the room. They passed over me with no show of recognition.

Rory shook her head. "Poor child, it was too much for her. She begin takin' on till I had to send for the doctor to quiet her. Hysterics, he said. Give her a sedy—sedy—a shot in the arm."

Frances moved restlessly. Rory

tiptoed over, caressed her forehead and whispered, "There now, darling. Please go to sleep." This was a Rory Crandell I had never glimpsed, calm, resourceful, tender. She turned out the bedside light, walked noiselessly back to the door and beckoned me outside.

"Is there—did they find out what caused Mr. Trayton's accident?" she asked.

"A broken cinch strap," I told her. "I can't understand it."

Rory slowly shook her head. "Me neither. Looks like he'da looked over that saddle the last thing he done. I knowed there was somethin' wrong, though, the minute he went off'n his balance. I was sittin' my horse inside the arena when it happened and I seen it all. God, I'll never get that outta my mind."

Forestalling Rory's rehashing of the tragedy, I murmured some words of sympathetic agreement and added, "Let me know if there is anything I can do for Francie," and was off.

I wanted nothing so much as to take a hot bath and go to bed. But I had one more errand to do. I had to see Teddy Beethoven. Hoping to catch the old eccentric at the Federal building writing his nightly postcard to the President, I headed for my room to get a coat. The 'phone was ringing as I entered.

"Miss Bucky?" a timid old voice questioned. "This is Mr. Beytower—Teddy."

"Why, Teddy, I was just going over to the Federal building to look you up."

"I won't be going to the post office for a spell. Sprained my ankle." After a moment's pause, he continued, "I just heard of Mr. Trayton's death and I'd like to see you. I—I have some information that I want to give you just in case—well, in case anything happens to me."

"Why, of course, Teddy. I'll come over." I suppose I didn't succeed in keeping apprehension out of my voice for he said, "You'll be all right, child. Take a taxi and have the driver wait till you get safely in."

It wasn't being abroad at night that I feared. "Do you mind if I bring

Hank Noyes?" I asked him.

Old Teddy hesitated some time. "No, Miss Bucky, you've got to trust me. After all, Mr. Noyes is a newspaperman."

"All right," I told him, "I'll come."

HE GAVE me an address in what we natives inelegantly refer to as "Snob Holler", a little island of beautiful old homes and exquisite gardens once occupied by Tucson's wealthiest citizens but now surrounded by the gas works and wrong-side-of-the-tracks buildings. I got all ready to go and then called Hank. He blew his top. I had him, though, because I threatened to leave the minute he hung up. So it was finally arranged that a pal of his, Bill Williams, would pick me up in his taxi, then hang around. Meantime, Hank would go on ahead and "case the joint", as he put it, hoping to peek in a window.

Bill Williams drove slowly through Snob Holler, hunting for the address. It was after eleven and the night was black except for an occasional pale street light whose shadows were only anaemic monsters on the ground. That strange silence of a tucked-in residential district, which makes you feel as though you were the only soul on earth, already was there.

Teddy's place had been a servant's quarters for one of the pink-stuccoed mansions. There was a naked light bulb over the numbered doorway which gave directly on the sidewalk.

"I'll pull down the street a piece," Bill Williams whispered as he opened the taxi door, "and walk back. If you need me, scream."

I put out a numb, unsteady hand, far colder than the brisk February night had made it, and knocked. Someone inside said, "Who's there?" and I answered. I recognized Teddy's voice. "Come in," he said, "the door isn't locked."

The room was reassuringly well lighted, warm and neat. Although rather bare looking, it certainly wasn't the hovel you ordinarily associate with recluses. Teddy sat in a big arm chair with his feet on an otto-

man and apologized for not getting up. Glancing nervously about the room, I noted that the blinds were tightly pulled.

"Sit down, child," he said, "and don't be frightened. I wouldn't have any more violence befall God's earth if I could help it, not even to the lowest of His creatures. Certainly not to you."

I smiled. "I am afraid," I told him, "but not of you. It's just that I have seen three people die in the last week. If you know anything that will put a stop to these murders . . ."

Teddy shook his head. "It's not that easy. 'Judge not that ye be not judged', the Good Book says. So first I must tell you a story. Listen to it carefully and consider what I've told you before you condone or condemn."

"I knew Charley Kayne," he said slowly, watching me to see how I would take it. "He was a fine, religious man, Miss Bucky. Best friend a man ever had. They drove him to it—to the river, I mean. He sent me his Lucky Burro."

Suddenly, my carefully-built armor of courage cracked up completely, leaving me limp with terror. Teddy Beethoven had had the Golden Burro, had had a blood-smeared violin case. The questions I had relegated to the far corners of my mind, came popping out. Who was this masquerading old man? Was he Charley Kayne in the flesh come back to play God, to wreak vengeance against those who were unkind to him? Or was he some old sourdough acquaintance of Charley's who had robbed him, stolen his Lucky Burro charm and pushed him into the river? I found it quite impossible to take my fascinated gaze off those rheumy, gimlet eyes which were now fixed on me in a trance-like stare.

"Charley and I tramped those hills up north for eighteen years together, Miss Bucky," he went on. "We knew each other as only men can who live by themselves. Many's the night we stretched out under God's stars and told each other what we'd do when we found the foot of the rainbow. Every spring we started out full of hopes and every fall we packed out

of the canyons like dead men.

"Well, Miss Bucky, Charley made his strike. His dream came true for him. He went to live on Park avenue."

IN HIS slow, oracular manner, old Teddy told me the story of Charley Kayne. Most of it I had already pieced together, and I was growing more and more nervous as he reveled in details and slipped at times into irrelevant reminiscences. Then he came to the story of the Transgression—as he called it, with a capital T — of Dyanne's father, Stewart Kayne.

"Stew was a good boy at heart but young and sort of devil-may-care. On the eve of his marriage to Dyanne's mother, he nearly died with the grippe and it was decided he should go to Tucson to regain his health. Well, he fell in love with a girl out here and wanted to marry her. His family was shocked and forbade it, and he returned East and married Dy's mother."

"A couple of months later his bride opened up a letter addressed to him. It said that the girl in Arizona was going to have a child and it was signed, 'A Friend'. Stew admitted his clandestine affair to his wife for the first time and begged for forgiveness but she couldn't find it in her heart. She made Stew give her a divorce."

Teddy paused in his recital, a far-away look in his sad, old eyes. "And what happened to the girl he left behind in Arizona?" I prompted.

"Well, when Charley finally struck it rich, he hired a detective agency to find the woman but they never did. So Charley always wondered whether someone just wrote that letter about the child to blackmail Stew."

"Seems strange," I mused, "that they never found the girl."

Old Teddy nodded. "Well, to get on with the story, when poor Charley took his life, he wrote me a letter. Must've mailed it the last thing he did. He told me about his will and asked me to keep an eye on Dyanne, to make sure she stayed married to Cowhide—at least that she gave her marriage another try."

"He begged me to take any action I thought necessary, no matter how drastic, to keep Dy hitched. Wrote that he'd just as soon see her dead—yes, Miss Bucky, those were his very words—as for her to mess up her life the way her father had done. He enclosed a letter for me to see that she received the day of the ceremony.

"He sent me a little box of keepsakes. Said that if Dy or anyone doubted me—if they didn't believe he'd written me—I'd have them to show as proof."

The old man's voice broke. He cleared his throat loudly. "Go over to that table yonder," he said, "and fetch me that brown envelope."

Try as I could, I couldn't get my reluctant feet off the floor. He smiled. "Go on, child. What's the matter?"

As I coaxed my body out of the chair, I glanced down at his feet. He had on shoes and there was no bandage about either ankle. He had said on the telephone, when he called me, that he had sprained his ankle badly.

Slowly, so as not to show fear, I turned my back on him and started for the table. I took a few steps, measured the distance to the drawn shade speculatively, and then I did the perfectly irresistible thing. I took a quick look over my shoulder.

OLD TEDDY'S hand moved swiftly down to the folds of the blanket at his side. Things in the room skidded about me dizzily. He drew out a small, shiny object and held it out. It was an old-fashioned, gold watch. I came back and dropped into the chair, completely forgetting the envelope.

The old man reached out a wizened hand and petted my arm. "Why, you poor girl. You're trembling all over."

There was no denying it, of course, and what was more, my fears weren't all in the past.

"You're Charley Kayne?" I asked.

Teddy appeared amazed, hurt and offended in turn. Finally he said, "So that's it? No, child, I'm not impersonating anybody. I'm just old Theodore Roosevelt Beytower, eccentric,

recluse and busybody. But I'm doing this for my friend Charley. Here, this was his watch." He started to show it to me, then drew his hand back. "But, no. That wouldn't prove anything. I could have taken it off his body. Let's see those pictures."

Once more I got up and this time I brought back the manila envelope. "See," he said, holding out a yellowed photograph mounted on cardboard. "This is a picture of Charley and Stew and me taken the summer before Stewart died."

I took one look and let the old photo slip out of my yielding fingers. Not one of the three men bore any resemblance to the old, bewhiskered man who faced me. But one did bear a resemblance to someone I knew. The gay blade in the center, obviously much the youngest of the trio, was the spitting image of Frances Crandell.

Chapter XVIII

THE SIGHT of that boyish face with its wide-set, dark eyes and dark, tumbling hair sent my thoughts into a wild stampede. Francie Crandell the daughter of Stewart Kayne, the only living blood relative of old Charley Kayne? But no, that couldn't be. Rory would have come forward with the facts long ago, to see that her Francie got her just share. Still, Rory had bragged that she could have married Stewart Kayne, that her Francie could have had all the green orchids in the country. Green orchids! A bell somewhere in the back of my head bonged but my thoughts, like an endless line of ducks in a shooting gallery, kept right on marching.

Old Teddy's creaky voice brought me to with a start. "So you noticed the resemblance, too. I saw it the moment I set eyes on Frances Crandell but I wanted to try the picture on someone else who knew her. "And," he added, "on someone I could trust."

"And you think Frances is Stewart Kayne's missing child and that it has something to do with these murders?"

"I don't know. God be my witness,

I don't. I thought I should tell, just in case it might. But if I got to the police, an innocent person may suffer humiliation. I have great faith in you, Miss Bucky. I trust this story to your discretion."

"You trusted me with another story, didn't you, Teddy? You sent me that note about the New York newspaper, knowing that I would follow the lead and learn about Louella Regan's past."

The old man nodded.

"I appreciate your faith but you've got to go the whole way with me." I saw his familiar violin case and walked over to it. "May I?" I asked. And before he could get his arthritic joints hitched around to see what I was doing, I had ripped off a patch made of many strips of adhesive tape, to disclose a small, round hole. When I glanced at him, he was grasping the chair arms and there was deep fright in his wrinkle-set eyes.

"The sixth bullet went in here, didn't it?" He only continued to fix on me unblinkingly. "Three shots entered Dyanne's body, two hit the wall and the sixth embedded itself in your violin case. That's why the sheriff's men didn't find it."

Tremors shook his frail body. Finally he said, unsteadily, "But I didn't shoot her, Miss Bucky. You can't believe I would do a terrible thing like that?"

No, I couldn't. Yet, "You were there, Teddy, and there was blood on your violin case. And why did you disappear the next day at lunch with me when Lock, Pinto Jones and Louella came in?"

"Lock knew me back in the old prospecting days and so did Pinto. I didn't want them to recognize me. I wanted to carry out Charley's will, and I felt I could best do it incognito."

"Didn't Dy know you?"

"No," he said. "She and her mother never had anything to do with Charley before he got his money and after he made his strike, I never had anything to do with them. Charley's friends weren't welcome in the home he'd made for them."

"What about the violin?" I insisted.

"Yes, Miss Bucky, I was there. I called up Miss Dyanne on the telephone that evening before she left for the Mission. I said, 'Miss Dyanne, your Uncle Charley Kayne sent me out here to watch out after you. You don't know me and you have never seen me, and maybe you never will, but I'll always be around where you are, Miss Dyanne, and I am going to see that you and Cowhide make a go of your marriage this time.'

"Well, Miss Bucky, she thought at first I was Charley Kayne. She said, 'No! No!' and then she didn't say anything for a few seconds. She was collecting herself. 'Uncle Charley,' she whispered finally. 'I never did think you committed suicide. I always thought you would be coming back.'

"God forgive me but I did not deny it. If she wanted to think I was old Charley come back from the grave, she could, and she might be a better wife to Cowhide for it.

"After we had talked a little, she got suspicious, though. She asked me to come out to the Mission—she was on her way then to be married—and keep out of sight until after the wedding. She wanted to see me. Said she was flying back to New York the next morning and this was our only opportunity. I told her I'd wait for her in the side patio of the Mission and that's why she got rid of Cowhide right after she marched out of the church. I stepped out of the shadows and she came up to me. 'You're not Uncle Charley,' she said accusingly. 'No,' I told her, 'but your Uncle Charley sent me.' I handed her Charley's Golden Burro as proof he had sent me and she took it and started to hold it up to the light coming from the front of the Mission. Then she was shot."

THE OLD man's words died and he covered his face with his scrawny hands.

"You saw the murderer?"

He shook his head. "Only the yellow-red blast from the nearby patio wall. It was too dark."

"What did you do then?"

"I bent over her an instant and then I slipped away. I knew she was beyond mortal help. Besides, there were plenty of others right there and I didn't want to be seen. I would have been rushed right off to jail as a suspect."

I asked him how he got away. "My old car. I had left it parked on the old dirt road south of the Mission in some bushes. I slipped into the Mission to hide for a time in a corridor and heard you coming, only I didn't know it was you at that time, Miss Bucky, and in my hurry to get out of there, I dropped my violin case. I recovered it after you went into the office and I hustled right out of there."

I looked at my watch. It was half past midnight. I was afraid Hank and Bill Williams would come crashing in at any moment and half afraid they wouldn't. "There's so much more I want to ask you, Teddy, but I must go now. It's late and you need your rest. But one more question. Did Lock Trayton know Stewart Kayne's story?"

"Yes."

When I finally got out of that bare, stuffy room and had put a solid door and considerable fresh air between me and the unnamed fears which also seemed to dwell there, I went limp with relief. Bill Williams' decrepit taxi up the street a way was the most beautiful automobile I had ever seen. I had barely climbed in when Hank came loping up. I gave him a quick account of the visit while we drove to the Frontier.

"If we only knew he is just what he says he is," I said.

"It shouldn't be hard to find out. For the police to, that is. They could search his room and trace him down. Check his story and . . ."

"And shave him," I interrupted.

"He offered no proof that he isn't Charley Kayne," Hank went on, ignoring my pertinent suggestion, "and he was at the scene of the murder when it was committed. He could have shot Dy and slipped out just as he said. He could have fired a bullet through that old violin either before or after the murder, just to use as

an alibi if he were questioned."

"And," I put in, "he could have murdered Lock because Lock recognized him. Everyone knows how eccentric Uncle Charley was. Maybe he figured all this out during his idleness in that fine Fifth avenue apartment. Having himself declared legally dead, I mean, then coming back to play at God."

"Sounds like an awful roundabout way to murder your profligate niece," Hank objected.

"You can't hold the behaviour of an eccentric up to any rational pattern," I quoted Louella.

"It looks might suspicious," Hank said, "that he hasn't gone to the authorities with what he knew before this instead of trying to focus suspicion on Louella and the Crandells. Because when you get right down to it, that's exactly what he's done."

I HAD to admit the truth in Hank's observation. Under the disarming guise of attempting to protect innocent people from humiliation, he had intentionally or not turned the finger of suspicion away from himself.

"If Frances Crandell actually is the illegitimate child of Stewart Kayne, it gives her a mighty nice motive for murdering Dyanne," Hank continued. "She could have gone to court to try to collect her half but illegitimate children usually don't have much proof to offer and she probably never could have gotten a judgment. This way, she gets Cowhide and the inheritance comes with him."

It must have been after two a.m. when Hank took leave of me in the Frontier lobby and turned sleepily home. The place was as quiet as the night before Christmas and I had the feeling that even the mice were asleep. Certainly old Jeff Cleyton, the night clerk, was. The lobby, dim stairway and long hall around the balcony loomed up like a trip through the Styx river country for my suddenly craven soul. I never like to be out alone at two a.m., for at that hour my imagination can conjure up a homicidal maniac out of a rocking chair or rustling curtain.

I chalked up my unshakable dread to my errant imagination and mounted the stairs to my room. I don't know why I put my hand on the knob and paused, but in that moment, I felt a soft caress at my ankles and sucked in my breath. Pancho! How did he get out of the room? The afternoon maid? But they all had strict orders. I drew my hand away as though from death, grabbed up the cat and hurried down the hall. I shook the night clerk awake finally and repeated the story three times before his sleepy thoughts cleared enough for action.

Jeff isn't too bright but he's no coward. He lifted an old-fashioned coat rack off its pedestal and took it along for a club. When he reached my room and took a bunch of keys out of his picket, I kept a safe distance. Swinging the door open, he stepped back and waited a moment, then reached in and switched on the light. The room appeared empty. I waited outside while Jeff made a thorough search. Whoever had been waiting for me, had slipped out while I went for help. I locked and bolted my door while Jeff made a search of the hotel. He came back later to report that he had found nobody but that fact gave me little comfort. I sat the remainder of the night in my dark room, wide awake and terrified by my own thoughts. Because before the first hint of light in the dark sky, I was completely confident in my own mind who had been waiting to silence me in my room, who had slipped under cover of darkness out to peaceful old San Xavier mission and ended the life of Dyanne Kayne, and I was pretty sure I knew why. The problem was to prove it.

I spent the morning in two long and heart-rending conferences, one with Dr. Semlay who had been my "psych" professor at the University of Arizona and who is one of the country's leading authorities on abnormal behavior. The other conference, if you could call it that, was with Lafayette P. Raterlee, deputy sheriff of Pima county. I had a lot of trouble with the latter, bringing him around to my point of view. We went

over and over the known facts, sorting evidence and evaluating motives. After considerable haranguing, Lafe finally agreed to send out men for certain evidence needed to clinch our case. What they found, left no doubt even in the mulish old deputy's mind.

When the time for action came, however, my heart failed me. I tipped off Hank, of course, and went to my hotel room and locked myself in, and told the switchboard girl not to put through any calls. Then I threw myself down on the bed and gave way to all the things that had been hammering away at my morale—shock and sorrow at Lock's death, nerve strain, exhaustion, and most of all, my part in the drama which was about to start in the room a few doors down the hall.

At shortly after two o'clock that afternoon, Lafe arrested Frances Crandell.

Chapter XIX

I WENT over to the court house late that evening feeling like a low, skulking dog. Justice, I suppose, like God, moves in a mysterious way and was bound to catch up with Dyanne Kayne's murderer sooner or later, yet I'm sorry to say that there are times when I felt genuine remorse for having given it a few helpful prods. It was at my suggestion, for instance, that Lafe waited to take Francie in until Rory was out of the hotel. Rory, I knew, would have scratched out the eyes of anyone who laid a hand on her Francie.

Everything had gone exactly as I had planned except for one thing—Francie's confession. That was a break we hadn't even dared to hope for. When Lafe sent me word she had dictated a detailed account of the three murders, I couldn't resist going over to check her story against the one I had pieced together. I found Lafe in his idea of heaven. The room was full of newsmen and photographers, and milky flash bulbs strewed the floor. Lafe was all horse up like a barber shop tenor and I could smell the brilliantine on his sparse hair from the doorway.

"Come on, Sheriff," one of the photographers was saying, "let us have just one shot of the dame."

Lafe oiled his tongue and smiled. "Not tonight, men. But tomorrow's another day."

The old Sheriff saw me finally and waved me in.

"Chee, it's Bucky Johnson," one of the reporters piped. "Say, are you in on this case?"

One of the photogs got ready to cock his camera and Lafe jumped to his feet. "Nope," I said, grabbing Lafe's arm, "I just dropped in to see Lafe before I go back to the great open spaces.

Lafe smirked and sat down again. "The transcript of her confession oughtta be up any minute now," he said when the gentlemen of the press had straggled out. "By the way, they caught that slippery Pinto Jones. The Border Patrol picked 'im up just as he was fixin' to go into Mexico. We slapped a bad check charge on 'im to hold 'im for the time bein'."

A boy came in just then with a document neatly typed on legal-size bond. Lafe glanced over it hurriedly, then handed it to me. "Here it is, all done in black and white."

I skipped over the preliminary paragraphs down to where the confession really began. It said:

"I have hated Dyanne ever since the day she set eyes on Cowhide. I might have gotten over their marriage in time if Cowhide had been happy but he never was and she wouldn't give him a divorce.

"I learned that she intended to live with him as husband and wife after the ceremony although she had fooled Cowhide into believing that if he went through with it, she would give him his freedom.

"The way she treated me was more than I could take. Just before the wedding she stopped me in the hall and invited me to come. She said, 'Do come. I'm sure dear Uncle Charley wouldn't mind since it'll be the last time you ever see my husband.' I wanted to slap her face for the way she said, 'my husband'. I gritted my teeth and walked away and she said, 'But please, my dear, don't bring

your horse'.

"I vowed right then that I'd kill her for that. Sure, I would accept her invitation. And I would bring my horse. I even had to laugh at the thought that it was her taunt that gave me the idea for murdering her. I'd slip out of the rodeo meeting, take Flash in his trailer to within a short cross-country ride of the Mission and then we'd see if Miss Dyanne got to go home with 'her husband'. It worked out perfectly. I got there just in time to see them coming out of the church—her and Cowhide. Only Cowhide kept walking between me and Dy until they got to their car and I thought I had missed my chance. But Dy came back and headed straight toward me. I emptied the revolver just to make sure.

"When I decided to kill Dyanne, I looked around for a gun that couldn't be traced to me. I happened to pass Lock's room and through the partially opened door, I saw his revolver lying on the table. I knocked, no one answered, so I took it.

"I thought everything had gone perfectly until I ran into Rock Morgan—the Mute—who used to work for us on the ranch. Somehow he knew I had shot Dyanne. He slipped me a note, blackmailing me.

"I knew he was completely unscrupulous, so I had to kill him. I was familiar with the tunnels under Dolores street and so I promised to pay him off in a tavern. I waited for him on a roof across the street and when I got a good bead on him, I let him have it.

"The possibility that the Mute had already gone to Lock kept growing in my mind until it became almost a certainty. I watched Lock carefully and knew he was conducting his own investigation and suspected me. Sooner or later he would have enough evidence to lay before the police. So I had no choice but to kill him. I made myself wait till I could make it look like an accident.

"I only wanted Cowhide to be happy and I could have given him that happiness. Now nothing else in the world matters to me. I do not want to go on living."

IT WAS signed in a quivery school girl slant, "Frances Crandell." I could hardly see through the tears in my eyes. I wanted to go to Francie and yet there was nothing I could say. She probably wouldn't have seen me anyway. Even Lafe Raterlee was upset and seemed alarmed when I got up to go.

"Why don't you stick around," he urged. "You got me into this, you know."

"What do you mean, 'Got you in'? You wanted to solve the case, didn't you?"

"Yes, but gol dern it, why did Sheriff Haley have to be out of town at a time like this. If I make mistakes, I'll be strung up."

"You're a great big sheriff," I told him. "You can handle the county attorney and the press and all, can't you?"

"Oh, shore, shore," Lafe assured me. "It ain't that." But I knew it was.

"You'll call me the minute you have any word from Rory, won't you?" Lafe nodded and I left, my heart weighing me down.

I met 'Pache in the lobby when I returned to the Frontier. He reported that Cowhide had stormed the jail in a futile attempt to see Francie and had gone off. Louella Regan was just coming out of her room. She quite obviously had been crying.

"I see you've heard the news," I said.

"What news?" she muttered unsteadily.

"About Frances Crandell's arrest for Dyanne's murder."

"Oh, yes. Poor kid. They ought to call it justifiable homicide and let her go." Louella turned her face quickly as tears came to her eyes.

I touched her arm. "What's the matter, Louella?"

Louella got out her handkerchief and blew her nose. "It's nothing. Oh, by the way, never mind trying to do anything about getting me that money. It doesn't matter now."

She let me pull her into my room. "You can tell me, you know," I invited. But she only shook her head.

"No, it's nothing to anyone but me, really. It's—it's just that someone I

loved . . ." She began to sob. "Oh, it all sounds maudlin, Kay. Please forget it."

"No, it doesn't, Lou," I said suddenly. "You can let your hair down now. The case is all solved, you know."

She nodded. "And so ends the life story of Rita Fallan. Long live Louella Regan. Everything and everybody in the first half of my life is dead," she said impulsively.

"Dead and buried. God, let it stay that way." Tears sprang into her eye and her voice broke.

"This much I'll tell you, Kay, but I have a feeling you've known it all along. I had a child by an unfortunate marriage years ago. He was never well—the child, that is—and I always needed more money than I could raise. He died yesterday. I just got a wire."

Louella crushed out the words and fled from the room.

Chapter XX

IT WAS dark when I arrived at the court house for the second time in answer to a hurry-up summons from Lafe. Rory had heard of her daughter's arrest and had demanded that Francie be released. She had called the deputies every name in the book and made a break in the direction of the jail before three men caught up with her. They had removed a pistol from her purse before taking her to Lafe's office.

When I walked in she sat small and beaten and silent in a big office chair. She rolled dull, black eyes up at me without moving her head or giving any noticeable evidence that she recognized me. A copy of Francie's confession which she had just read lay on the desk before her. Lafe, another deputy and Pete Moreno, the court stenographer, watched her in tense silence.

"It's true," she mumbled as though to herself. "Francie's got it down right, every last word of it. Dyanne Kayne—the dirty, little, thievin' piece a carrion. She got just what was a-comin' to her." Rory looked straight

at me. "Just what was a-comin' to her, I tell you."

Great beads of perspiration stood out on her face. With a nervous little gesture, she wiped her forehead with her hand and pushed back the lock of stubborn black hair that always hung there. Even the insensitive old Sheriff noticed how stifling the room had become and moved over to open a window. Rory, cowed and listless, watched Lafe's shambling progress across the room with a lackluster gaze.

She snapped to life with a swiftness that left us stunned. With perfect timing she leaped as Lafe turned his back on her, grabbed the big gun that bobbed at his hip as he walked, and had us all covered before we could say a word. The once dull eyes were snapping again, the sagging jaw stuck out defiantly.

"Now," she began after she had maneuvered us into a corner and herself in front of the closed exit, "there's a thing or two that Francie left outta this here document and I aim to put it in. You," she said to the stenographer, "git goin'. This here is for the records."

Pete poised a shimmying pencil over his note pad. Rory laughed. 'I'll bet this is the first time anyone ever made you take down anythin.' Usually it's t'other way around. You hombres usually hold the gun on the poor guy and make him confess. You don't need to deny it. I know how you operate. You scairt my Francie into confessin'. Well, I'm a-gonna tell you a few things she didn't.

"She didn't tell you she was Stewart Kayne's daughter, did she?" Rory glanced to make sure Pete was scribbling. "Well, she is. But she never knew it. I've always told her what a fine man her father was and how she must be the kind of daughter he woulda been proud of. Only I never let on to her that she was born outta wedlock and that Stewart Kayne was her own flesh and blood. After she got big enough to explain such thing to, it woulda broke her heart, she was that proud.

"Then when old Charley Kayne made his strike and Dyanne was aim-

in' to get all his money I purtty near't went to Charley and told. But they's some things worth more to a child than lots of money, I says, so I waited. Besides, I couldn't prove nothin'. Not without admittin' to the world . . ." Rory paused till Pete caught up in his shorthand. "Be sure you get this now . . . to the world that I ain't Francie's mother."

My mouth must have dropped open and stayed there. That was one thing I had never dreamed of but the minute the words were out I wondered that I had never guessed. I had often marveled that they were so unlike.

"Surprised, ain't you?" Rory continued. "Well, it's the gospel truth. Francie's mother was my best friend. Frail girl, she was, and beautiful. She was new out here and din't have no friends but me. She clerked in a store in Tucson and I introduced her to Stewart Kayne. He'd taken quite a shine to me but when he met Anne—Anne Rogers was her name—he fell in love right away with her fine manners.

"He went back East to fix things up with his feeance sos't he could come back and marry Anne but he never come and Anne died when Francie was born. I wrote Stew onc't tellin' him of Anne's condition but he never wrote back and not long after Anne died, I read in the papers that he shot hisself. So I taken the poor little mite of a scrawny Francie and I raised her as if she was my own and no one but me and the oldwoman that helped bring her in this world knew but what she warn't my own."

RORY PAUSED to look fiercely at each of us in turn. "An' nobody would've ever known, not ever in this world, 'cept that Francie wouldn't want me for her flesh and blood any more. If no one'd found out about the murders it woulda worked out fine and I coulda went on bein' her mother always but as it is, she wouldn't never marry Cowhide, knowin' that her own flesh and blood mother was a murderer. My Francie is proud, that girl!"

Gun aimed, she paused with her

hand on the door knob. It's all true, that confession of Francie's — all 'ceptin' one little thing. It wasn't her done it. It was me."

Her eyes darted from face to face defiantly. "Sure, I snitched Lock's gun and slipped outta the rodeo meetin' an' drove hell bent for the Mission, just like Francie said. Only it was my horse, not hers, I took along. I give Dyanne just what was comin' to her. Do you think that hussy would've ever give up that poor dumb Cowhide? Do you think she'da ever stayed away from 'em. 'Course not. I heard her connivin' and I knew she aimed to hogtie that cowpoke for the rest of time. And I heard her hurt my Francie. Do come to the weddin'," she says. It'll be the last time you'll ever see my husband. An' don't bring your horse."

Rory mimicked Dyanne's words with deadly sarcasm. "It was all I could do to keep from rushin' outta my room and stretchin' her little white neck. But I thought of a better plan. But that Mute had to see me. Thought he was goin' to frame me but I got him first. I seen some drunk down in the tunnel, so I tossed the gun to him. Let the cops think it was him shot the Mute, I says.

"An Miſter High - and - Mighty Trayton knew too much. I always know'd he'd heard about Stew Kayne's child and he'd seen Stew many times an' I was always 'fraid he'd recognize my Francie. I wouldn't killed him for that, though, but he got to snoopin' 'round. Maybe the Mute already ratted on me. Anyway, it wasn't safe havin' him sneakin' 'round. I filed that damn cinch down the day before but it didn't bust. So I got in and give it another swipe with the file the next day."

Rory paused for breath. "Now," she cautioned, "do you jackasses believe that my Francie didn't have nothin' to do with these murders or do I have to pound it into your heads?"

She looked fiercely at Lafe. His Adam's apple ran up and down a few times before he could speak.

"Nope, reckon you don't, Rory. Fact is, we know'd you done it all

along. Only we just wanted to hear you say it."

Rory's hand tensed about the gun and my fascinated gaze saw the trigger move. Lafe went white clear to the end of his big nose. Probably the only thing that kept her from shooting him on the spot was the knowledge that a shot would arouse the quiet courthouse and she was preparing to make her getaway.

"If any of you are aimin' to follow, the first one as pokes his head outta this here door will get it blowed off." With that, she backed out and quietly closed the door.

A deputy leaped to the door and threw it open. Cautiously, he stuck out his head. A gun roared and a bullet landed in the door jamb where his head had been.

Chapter XXI

RORY ESCAPED. Luck had been with her. She had backed down the empty corridor to the street where she had parked her car. Before the officers could give chase, she was lost in the heavy night traffic of the holiday season.

It was my duty to break the news to Cowhide who in turn was elected to tell Francie. So I left the hullabaloo at the court house and trudged once more back to the Frontier. 'Pache had Cowhide in hand when I arrived. He took the story in his typical laconic style. I gave him the briefest possible version and had just sent him on his way to Francie when Hank came in.

"You look all poohed out, Sheriff,"

"I could use a flock of aspirin," I said. "I've got a headache to end all headaches."

"Headache?" said Louella from the doorway. "I can fix that." She returned a moment later with the aspirin and a glass of water. "You rest and let me pack for you."

"You're an angel, Lou. Louella is going out to the Tres Santos with me tomorrow," I explained to Hank. "I think it will do her good. I know it will me."

After the aspirin had begun to take effect, I felt almost human again. In

the meantime, Hank told Louella the whole story, including an account of the night that we followed Lock to the Wishing Shrine.

"The way I figure it from what Louey has told me," he said, the Mute thought Lock was double crossing him and his dope ring and the Mute trailed Lock to find out whom Lock was dealing with. But the party never showed up.

"The Mute undoubtedly had an appointment that night to meet Rory at the spot where she killed him. I don't think she was up on that roof waiting just on the chance he would pass by. No, she had told him she would meet him there to pay him his blackmail money.

"I still don't know, though," Hank wound up, "how you knew it was Rory."

"It's a long story," I said. "I got a lot of clues—green orchids and a mother complex and Lock listening at the keyhole and too-perfect alibis—but they didn't fit together until Lock died.

"That night I went back to my room and sat thinking and the pieces fell together.

"Lock had listened at my keyhole only a few hours before. At the time I had thought he was trying to find out what, if anything, Rory knew. He had as much as said just before Rory came in that he knew who the murderer was. But I had misconstrued his evasiveness. I had thought it was an intimation of his own guilt. Looking back a few hours, I suddenly realized that Lock knew Rory had killed both Dyanne and the Mute and he thought I would be next. He had watched through the keyhole to make sure Rory didn't harm me. That could be the only explanation.

"That got me started. Suddenly some green orchids pushed themselves up out of my sub-conscious. You'll remember the night the Mute was murdered Rory bragged to me that she could have married Stewart Kayne and then Francie, not Dyanne, could have been rich. She could have bought her Francie all the green orchids in the world, she said.

"I hadn't thought anything of the

remark then. But how could Rory know that Dyanne had worn green orchids? The write-ups in the newspapers had said she would wear blue orchids. They were to be her something blue. Dy was very put out, you remember, because the florist had made a mistake and sent green orchids. It was unlikely that anyone at the wedding had told Rory since she had nothing in common with anybody there. That left only one other way she could have known. She, or Francie, had been there and seen Dyanne come out of the church—had noticed the green orchids when Dy had stood for a second in the glow of the light above the doorway.

"Other things pointed to Rory. It was significant that she had had an alibi or a reasonable facsimile thereof for each occasion. A smart murderer would see to that. Francie didn't have good alibis and neither did Lock, Louella, Pinto, Teddy nor Cowhide.

"The fact that she had her nightgown on and was in her room when I returned home from Dolores street, the night the Mute was shot, didn't obviate the possibility that she had taken a short cut through the underground tunnels, arrived ahead of me at the hotel and slipped into a gown.

"And remembering the informal nature of the rodeo association meetings, with people coming and going all of the time and milling about, could any one person swear positively that she had been in the room every minute? The more I thought about it, the more I doubted it. Dr. Semlay bore out my misgivings. Two hundred witnesses, he said, were the same as no witness at all. Now if there had been only a few people in attendance, they would have observed Rory if she had slipped out."

"**L**AFFE'S deputies couldn't find anyone who had seen Rory leave or return to the rodeo meeting. She was clever about that. But he did find someone who'd seen Francie leave. That was significant because Francie didn't try to cover up. She went down in the elevator.

"What bothered me for a long time,

however, was that Rory had offered to confess to save Francie. You'll remember that was when she thought Lafe's deputies were doing too much snooping on Francie and she had come to me. Certainly no guilty person would dare focus attention on herself in such a way. Or would she? If she were smart, wouldn't she figure that the normal reaction to such a move would be to discount its genuineness, just as I had done?

"The more I thought about her offer to confess, the surer I was that Rory was the murderer. It was better than any clue. Because if Rory had been sincere and actually had intended to confess at that time to save Francie, certainly she wouldn't have told anyone, since by telling someone, especially me, she would wreck her confession. I would have informed Lafe Raterlee that it was a scheme to help Francie go free.

"No, Rory knew that Lafe had nothing on Francie and she was only putting on a show for me. She didn't know anything about the kind of psychology they teach in the books but she was as smart instinctively as a coyote."

Hank got out his old pipe and got it going. "How'd Lock find out about Rory?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "When Dy was shot with his own gun, Lock left no stone unturned in his own quiet way and he must have turned up something on Rory, particularly since he knew the background and knew her connection with the Mute. Rory and he became increasingly suspicious of each other. Lock apparently had ferreted out enough information to take to the authorities and Rory had to murder him.

"Rory always had lived in mortal fear of him, I imagine, because Lock had known Stewart Kayne and he's known Rory for years. So he must have known that Francie was Stewart's child. But Lock Trayton was a pretty regular guy. I imagine he kept Rory's secret because he knew she would give Francie more love and happiness than any of her blood relatives would.

"I don't suppose Lock realized that

Rory's love for Francie went any deeper than the devotion of a lonely, childless woman for a girl she'd raised from birth. But it did. Rory, you know, was infatuated with Stewart Kayne and as the little girl grew to look more and more like him, Rory substituted Francie for her first love. That's the way Dr. Semlay explained it this morning when I talked to him. I asked if a mother complex could become abnormal enough to motivate three murders and he said yes and cited numerous cases where mothers had killed over either real or imagined wrongs done their offspring."

"But Rory isn't Francie's real mother," Hank objected.

"I know. But according to Dr. Semlay the yearning to be a mother sometimes becomes so great in a childless woman that it amounts to an obsession. In Rory's love-starved life, her passion for Francie assumed a fierce, protective quality that would have had no place in a normal family relationship.

"Rory rationalized the murder of Dyanne with the argument that Francie, not the spit-fire Dyanne, was truly her father's daughter. Besides, Francie deserved a share of Uncle Charley's fortune but Rory was smart enough to realize the improbability of getting a hunk of it away from Dyanne through the courts. Any such attempt, moreover, would have brought to light the facts of Francie's birth, and so strong had Rory's fixation become through the years that she would have died rather than admit to Francie and the world that she was not her mother.

"WHEN SHE confessed just now to the murders, she gave up something much dearer to her than her own life. She would never have told to save her own life. But she had to, to save Francie's. I knew that and I hate myself for it but we used Francie to wrench an honest-to-goodness confession out of Rory.

"Francie obviously had seen her mother leave the rodeo meeting and had had a premonition — probably

had seen her blind with rage when Dy had invited her, Francie, to the wedding — and was afraid Rory might make a scene. I doubt if Francie remotely suspected that night that Rory was murder bent.

"Anyway, Francie had watched her mother so carefully that she herself could confess to the murders step by step, and still her confession could be checked and there would be no discrepancies. What she didn't actually see, she pieced together from newspaper stories, I suppose, and Cowhide no doubt had told her exactly what had happened at the time Dy was shot.

"Francie's knowledge of Rory's crimes, of course, nearly drove her crazy. That's why she wouldn't make up with Cowhide. She was torn between her moral code, her love for Cowhide and her rather strange devotion to Rory. She wouldn't tell on her mother, neither would she ever have married Cowhide, even though the crimes had gone unsolved, knowing that her own mother had murdered to buy her happiness—and her fortune."

Hank interrupted. "Do you think Rory would have murdered Dy and two others if the half million dollars hadn't been involved?"

"Yes, I rather believe she would," I answered carefully, "though I feel certain that Rory intended to make sure that Cowhide and Francie got the fortune. Cowhide had proclaimed long and loud that he didn't want any part of Dy's filthy lucre and I think Rory knew that Cowhide had signed over all claim to any of it before the ceremony. I'm sure that the signed paper was what Rory was looking for—and found—when I surprised her in Dy's room right after the slaying. Cowhide tore the place up trying to find it to prove his statement that he didn't want her money. And if he could have located it, it would have taken a lot of suspicion off him."

The 'phone rang and we both jumped. Hank picked up the receiver. A moment later he said, "It was Lafe. Rory is dead. She crashed into a road barricade the deputies had set

up on the Nogales highway. Her car turned over three times and killed her instantly."

WHEN LOUELLA and I got back to the Tres Santos, where you can hear a dove call two miles away and you can see for a hundred miles and never see a soul, it was so blissful we vowed we'd never leave it as long as the food held out. We did, though, and just a month after Rory's confession and suicide.

Francie wouldn't take no for an answer. This time, she and Cowhide are taking the vows before anything else happens to stop them, and everything is right with the world. I'm a bridesmaid again and Hank is going to stand up for Cowhide. I'm hoping the ceremony will put some ideas into Hank's head.

Hank was on hand at the Frontier to greet us when we arrived. The sight of old Lafe Raterlee, fairly glistening with self admiration, reminded me unpleasantly of my arrival a month before on the eve of Dyanne's ill-fated ceremony.

Lafe could hardly wait till the greetings were over to show Lou and me his clippings. "Pitchers in the paper 'n everythin'," he said as he passed out a much handled roll of news prints. "Your boy friend here is sure a right guy. Anytime Hank Noyes wants to run for mayor, the Sheriff's office is behind him one hundred per cent."

Lafe turned on Hank the idolizing gaze of a cocker for his master. I fully expected the old fool sheriff to lick Hank's hands. The Bulletin had carried a two-column picture of Lafe and a laudatory account of his work on the case, giving him entire credit for its solution. There were clippings from papers all over the country and the Corn Belt Express in Delphos, Kansas, had run his picture, too.

"Well, congratulations, Sheriff," I said, impressed in spite of myself.

Lafe grinned and the spines on the end of his cactus nose wiggled. "Well, I'll have to admit I had some help. But you said you didn't want your name mentioned."

"That's right," I told him. "Hope

it gets you a promotion."

I saw Lafe gazing at Louella as though he'd never seen her before. "Say," he drawled, "that there desert air sure did things for you, Miss Regan. You're lookin' wonderful. And you are too, Bucky. You looked a mit peaked when you pulled out of town." And then he added after a quick once over, "Put on some weight, ain't you?"

From Lafe Raterlee, who grew up in the Lillian Russell era, that was a compliment. Fact is, I had put on five pounds but I didn't think it

showed. I shot Hank a look and caught a malicious twinkle in his eyes.

"You're not exactly one of those hungry-looking dames in Vogue," he said. "Trouble with you is, lamb chop, you've gone out of style."

That burned me up because I know perfectly well he prefers curves, especially on blondes. "Come on, Louella," I said in my best grand manner. "I feel like putting on my new black dress and going out to slink. Goodbye, boys."

THE END

JOAQUIN MURIETA—MEXICAN BANDIT



BY CARTER T. WAINWRIGHT



THE worst bandits and desperados in Columbia during the gold rush days were the Mexicans. You couldn't blame them for taking up a lawless life after the way they were pushed around by the Americans. The land had originally belonged to the Mexicans and they could do just as they pleased with it, then the Americans crowded in and tried to get rid of the Mexicans. The Americans passed a law that every foreign miner had to pay a tax of twenty dollars a month or quit, and they fired off a lot of ammunition to enforce this law. This scared most of them out, but those with stronger spirit turned against the Americans. They decided that if the Americans wouldn't let them mine that they would wait till the gold was out of the ground and then take it away from them. So they organized bandit gangs, and Joaquin Murieta was one of their best leaders.

Joaquin had been a very mild-tempered Mexican. He was driven off his claim by the Americans, so he got a job in a gambling house, married a young Mexican girl named Rosita, and settled down in a little cabin near Saw Mill Flat. One night while Joaquin was at work, some drunken Americans broke into his cabin and abused Rosita till she died. That was almost more than he could bear, but Joaquin still didn't make trouble. He started out with his brother to find a more peaceful land. While they were looking around, they were captured by a posse of Americans. Americans believed that all Mexicans were horse-thieves unless they could prove otherwise. Joaquin's brother talked back to them so they hung him on the nearest limb and gave Joaquin forty

lashes on his bare back. At this, Joaquin's patience gave out and he decided that he would begin to even up the score with the gringos. So he rounded up several other abused Mexicans and started through the gold region robbing the miners, gambling houses, and gold exchanges. They had so many friends and sympathizers that were always ready to help them escape that it was nearly impossible for a posse to find them. The band would separate and hide out in forests and caves till they could make their way back to Mariposa County where they could divide the gold. After it was all spent, they would congregate and go on another raid. Joaquin had studied to be a priest and he was so smart that he could outwit the authorities every time. One time he was at a gambling table when a drunken gringo came in and made the boast which he backed up with five hundred dollars, that he could kill the great Murieta any time he met him. Joaquin grabbed his pouch, put a pistol in his face and said, "I'll take that bet. I'm Joaquin Murieta." And before the American knew what had happened, his money was gone and the bandit was galloping away.

After so many crimes by Joaquin's gangs, the Americans were in a rage. They got up a posse of three hundred men, divided into several parties and went all over the county. Every time they'd meet a Mexican they'd take his horse and gun and tell him to get out. They offered rewards for Joaquin. One offered for his head its weight in gold. One posse trailed the gang up to their camp in Tulare County where several bandits were killed in a running fight. One was

supposed to be Joaquin. One man of the posse cut his head off, and before taking it in to collect the reward, he melted some bullets and poured the lead in through the ears to make the head weigh more in order to collect a heavier reward. Then they carried this head around to the mining camps where Joaquin had been a terror, and charged everyone a dollar to see it.

Joaquin was not as cold-blooded as some people thought. He was a robber, but most of the gruesome murders charged against him were committed by his followers. Three-fingered Jack was one of the most vicious. He delighted in killing Chinamen along the roads. He'd wind the Chinaman's queue a couple times around his hand, and pull his head way back and slit his throat. When asked why he always used this tech-

nique, he said that he enjoyed watching them roll their eyes.

After their leader was done for, the Joaquin gang scattered, and things were quite peaceful for a while. Then a Mexican named Vasquez collected the remnants and went on raids as Joaquin had done before. He was ruthless and kept the posses busy for quite some time. When they caught him they kept in San Jose jail till they could get him tried and hung. Although they broke his neck with a rope, they could never break his spirit. He sent for the undertaker to come and take his measurements for a coffin, and told him just how to make it. When it was completed, he slept in it so he could get used to a narrow space. When people would visit him, he would get in it to show them how it would look.

INDIAN MASSACRE

★ By JON BARRY ★

THE Me-wuk Indians were a peaceful people. They couldn't understand it when the white men came into their land and started muddying their streams and scaping their land down to bare rock for a yellow metal that was too soft for any use. They thought that this stupid business couldn't last long, so they just kept moving back out of the way up the South Fork into the Cave County.

They weren't fighters like some of the tribes of the Plains, and did not even have a ceremonial dance. They just wanted to be left alone. But the miners wouldn't have it that way, and in 1851 six Frenchmen went right into the Cave Country. At that time all the men of the camp had gone away to a pow-wow, and left their women to gather acorns. When the Frenchmen wandered into camp and realized that all the men were away, they started abusing the women. A young Indian boy ran twenty miles to where the pow-wow was being held and the men came home as fast as they could. They surrounded the camp and killed four of the Frenchmen and the other two escaped to spread the alarm. The miners didn't stop to ask if the Indians had any reason for killing the white men. They just grabbed their guns and charged into the camp and killed every man, woman, and child. A few that had managed to escape and hide in the caves said that only four little babies were left alive. They were strapped on their mother's backs. The white men set them on stumps and left them crying for their dead mothers.

CRAZY HORSES

★ By PETE BOGG ★

THERE are many animals of the West that are shot on sight for theirs is a murderous intent. There are timber-wolves, mountain lions, and wild dogs always in search of young calves. Occasionally horses, steers, and cows which seemed to be mentally deranged, are apt to attack the ranchmen or their mounts. These mad horses attack by rearing up on their hind legs and striking hammer-like blows with their front hoofs. The deranged cattle attack by prodding with their sharp horns or by trampling their victim.

Part of these "locoed" brutes were victims of feeding on toxic plants or loco weed. Horses more often than cattle became addicts to these poisonous plants, and quite often would turn down good grass when they could find enough of this illegitimate food.

These weeds caused the animal to die from starvation. First they thinned the victim, then injured its eyesight and muscular control, and nervous system. Then there would seem to be an abnormal growth of hair in the mane and tail, and in the case of cattle, an increase in hair around the beast's flanks. Finally the weed affected the brain and caused the animal to run amuck and kill or injure part of the herd.

These death-dealing plants put two new words into the dictionary, the words, "locoed" and "rattled." The first is a synonym for crazy, and the second means confused. The seed pods of the loco weed rattled like gourds when they were dry, and some people called them rattle-weeds.

JIMMIE MAKES THE FORT



The Kiowa let out a single cry of surprised pain as Jimmie raised the carbine and fired . . .



BY CHARLES RECOUR

A schoolroom was waiting at Fort Hodges for Jimmie — but the Fort was a long way off and a band of murdering Kiowas taught him his first lesson . . .

“YEP, son, we’ll be in Fort Hodges in about three days,” the bearded man said, as he flicked a fly with a whip-tip from the back of one of the plodding span. He glanced warily around the horizon, and then spat over the side of the heavily laden Conestoga.

“If our luck holds out and we don’t run into any Sioux or Kiowa,” he

continued, “we’ll make the Fort. An’ you’re goin’ to school, son. It’s about time you had some schoolin’—kid goin’ on ’leven should know how to read and cipher.”

The boy looked up with poorly concealed worship in his eyes. “Will I like it, Pa?” he asked. “What good’ll it do me, Pa? I want to grow up and join the cavalry. Do the soldiers have

to know how to read and cipher?"

There was affection in the man's eyes as he looked down at the boy.

"I reckon your Maw and me know what's best, Jimmie, even if she ain't here anymore. She said I should see you get some schoolin' and I'm goin' to, too. It ain't bad, son, an' you gotta know them things to get a commission in the cavalry. You want one, don't you?"

"Was Uncle Jim an officer, Pa?" the boy asked.

"No, he was only a sergeant, son. But he was a good man. You'll be as good as he was. Oh well—enough chin music for now, Jimmie. We got to think about Fort Hodges. I'm keepin' on this trail. If Injuns show up, the cavalry'll find us anyhow—if we stay on the trail."

The boy, his yellow hair flashing in the sun, scrambled from the sprung seat to take up his watch-post at the rear end of the wagon. The heavy breech-loading Sharps lay to one side of him and there was a six-gun in its holster alongside the rifle. Even though it was a strain for the boy to lift the rifle, he rested it on the backboard and pot-shotted imaginary Sioux coming up the trail.

The bearded man, Jessup Gladdon, concentrated on nursing his teams along, hoping that in the few hours before nightfall they would hit a waterhole. The ground here was mostly sandy but there seemed to be promise of water in the brush that was appearing more profusely as they went on. There was a barrel of it in the wagon, but that had to be saved as much as possible.

Jessup felt good. Only three days from Fort Hodges now, he thought. We're goin' to make it this time. I knew that corporal was crazy warnin' me about Kiowas and Sioux. There ain't been one of 'em around here for a year. We gotta make it. Louise would like Jimmie bein' at the Fort. He can get his schoolin' and maybe next year I can buy some land. Then we'll make a real farmer out of him.

The thoughts tumbled through Jessup's mind. When his wife had died

the year before, leaving him with the boy, he knew it was going to be rough on both of them. But he was a good carpenter and he found that the Army Post of Fort Hodges, that little civilized dot in the wilderness could use him. He had finally gotten the wagon and equipment, but he missed out on the convoy that had gone three weeks before. An infantry corporal back at the town of Corry had warned him not to make the trip alone, but he figured the corporal was just bragging about the dangers of the Indian territory. While he hadn't seen any hostiles yet, and he thought he wouldn't, there was still a queasy feeling within him.

It's probably my imagination, he thought. This sun is pretty hot and I worry too much anyhow.

"How is it back there, son?" he called over his shoulder at the same time wiping the sweat from his forehead with a huge bandanna.

"Ain't seen none yet, Pa. Reckon I won't, neither," the boy answered in a disappointed tone.

THE WAGON slowly groaned on. The slobbering of the horses, the creak of axles and the soft sigh of the wind were the only sounds. The afternoon lengthened and the shadows started to grow. The evening brought with it a gentle breeze from the direction into which the wagon was heading and satisfied, Jessup felt the first coolness.

I'll keep on till sun-down, he thought. Then the horses can rest and Jimmie and I can stuff some grub into us. He needs more meat on him.

Jessup turned around again as he often did and looked back at the boy. He was lying on a blanket steadily gazing back along the trail, scanning it thoroughly. The rifle and the six-gun rested beside him. Jessup's gnarled face broke into a smile. Pride bubbled out of him. He let the reins go slack and drew out his old corn-cob.

Slowly he stuffed rough-cut into it and cupping his hands around a huge sulfur match he lit it. Grateful-

ly he inhaled the pungent smoke.

With luck, they'd make Fort Hodges, he told himself for the thousandth time. And then he'd be able to go to work.

But there was that suggestive premonition of dread that hung over him like a vulture over a body. The Indians were stirred up and that was bad. But the corporal wasn't necessarily right even though they should have made the convoy and not tried it alone. Besides two months was too long to wait for the next convoy anyway.

"Pa," Jimmie suddenly called to the front of the wagon, "take a look at that dust cloud."

Jessup looked around. "Where, son?" he asked.

"It's comin' up to the left of the trail. You reckon it's Injuns? Huh, Pa?" Jimmie asked excitedly.

"Might be, Jimmie. Take it easy and watch close. Come here an' take the team. I'm goin' back there."

Like a spring, Jimmie bounded to the front of the wagon and took the reins from Jessup's hand. It was no trick for him to handle them. He was more at home with horses, than with anything else. Jessup scuttled to the rear.

He squinted his eyes into focus. The dust cloud was real all right and it was growing larger. For five minutes Jessup studied it steadily. Rapidly it expanded and now he could begin to make out details.

There were six of them. That was sure. And from what little he could see of their battle-gear they were Kiowas. They were riding hell-bent for the wagon. It wasn't often that there were such easy pickings. A lone wagon—and lightly manned.

They knew there was no need to stalk or trail this victim, Jessup thought. Just pounce on it and grab. A sickening fear wrenched at his heart—not for himself of course but for Jimmie. The Kiowas were slaughtering indiscriminately—men, women and children. They wouldn't leave anything alive as long as there was plunder to take.

Jimmie knew what was going to

happen. He glanced around and saw Jessup pick up the Sharps, lay it over the backboard and squint along the sights.

"Kin I shoot too, Pa?" the boy asked, his eyes alight with the excitement of the chase. "Please let me take a crack at 'em?" There was no fear in his voice, only child-like curiosity and exuberance at the thought of fighting Indians. After all, his Pa was there, wasn't he?

"Keep 'er steady, son," Jessup called back. "You'll get a chance to shoot. I'm goin' to knock a couple of 'em down or know why."

"What are they, Pa? Kiowas or Sioux?"

"They're Kiowas, Jimmie. Mean varmints too."

Finally they had grown distinct enough for Jessup to identify some features of them. They were rifle-armed and he would have sworn they had the new Winchester repeaters.

The wagon had picked up some speed under the crack of Jimmie's whip, and the lash of his tremolo voice. In spite of its rocking, Jessup lay a bead on the foremost Kiowa. The distance between the wagon and the Kiowas was rapidly lessening. Jessup squeezed the trigger of the Sharps.

There was a flat crack, the whine of the bullet, a puff of smoke and the lead Kiowa jerked erect in the saddle. He flung his rifle straight up and then toppled off. His pony raced madly on. The others didn't stop.

JIMMIE saw the man fly from the saddle in one quick backward glance. He shouted gleefully.

"Get another, Pa! Get another!" he screamed.

The Kiowas were firing from the saddle now and lead was whistling too close for comfort. Jessup reloaded the Sharp in flash. Once again he shoved it over the backboard. He got the stock to his shoulder. Before he could aim again, there was the thud of metal into flesh and Jessup dropped to the floor of the wagon. He would never fire again.

Jimmie turned around at the same

instant. His startled eyes took in the shocking sight. Pa lay on the floor in a pool of blood, his body jerking grotesquely with the jolting of the wagon. The Sharps had fallen off the wagon.

In that instant, Jimmie became a man. The tears that started to cloud his eyes cleared as if by magic. A fierce anger seized him. Pa was dead! He dropped the reins and jumped to the back of the wagon, scrambling over the bundles and boxes that littered it. The wagon was bouncing crazily now and Jimmie tripped and fell across his father's body. His face was a mask of fatalistic anger, the numbed and maddened boy ripped the six-gun from its holster. Holding it in both hands, he set the barrel on the tailboard. Grimly determined, he squeezed the trigger.

The Kiowas, seeing only the figure of the boy, were rushing up with careless abandon. Jimmie's first shot caught the pony of the leading warrior in the throat. It stumbled and fell but its cat-like rider landed on his feet. The six-gun in Jimmie's hands roared again and again. But it was too much for him. His grief and rage, coupled with the careening wagon ruined any chance of his hitting—except by luck. As he fired the last shot, the frightened horses dragged the wagon to one side of the rutted trail. One wheel hit a large rock. The wagon bounced. And like a tossed pebble, Jimmie flipped through the air . . . the Kiowas were not twenty feet away . . .

THEY RODE along in single file with Sergeant Martin in the lead. From the slow pace of their mounts, a lagging walk, and the dispirited air of the three troopers, it was plain that they were bushed. Nobody spoke and the only sound besides the clanking of accoutrements was the thud of hooves on the sandy soil.

The uniforms of the four men were drenched with sweat and there was no spark to their manner.

"What do you think, Larkin?" the sergeant suddenly spoke the first

words that had been said in the past two hours. "Will we make water tonight?"

"Hah, that's a laugh, Martin," the first trooper said, "It's not more than ten minutes to sundown now. We'll have to nurse the canteens again."

"Yeah, but what about the horses?" the short, fat trooper bringing up the rear, entered the conversation.

"Let 'em graze, as usual, hobbled, when we bivouac. They'll lap enough dew from the brush to keep goin'." Martin answered. "We've done it for two days and tomorrow we go back to the Post. It's rough on 'em, but they can last."

The slowly drifting cavalry troop topped the little rise in the trail, and Martin's head was the first to see, in the dim, dusky twilight, the scene before them.

He straightened in the saddle magically, the fatigue dropping from him like an old shirt.

"Carbines!" he roared, "Kiowas!"

He shoved spurs to his horse as did the three troopers, but it was an almost hopeless thing. The Conestoga wagon was careening madly down the road and the Kiowas, who hadn't spotted the troopers behind them, were rapidly closing in on it.

Martin saw a strange thing. A little boy appeared to be in the back of the wagon and nobody was at the reins. He saw a gun appear over the backboard, held tightly in the little boy's hands. The lead Kiowa toppled and the soldier wasn't sure whether the man or the horse had been hit, until he saw the Kiowa land on his feet.

At the same time, the hard riding soldiers saw the wagon bounce and the figure of the little boy spill through the air like a hurled ball.

THE KIWAS were almost to the spot when the first shots came from the troopers. Martin nailed one with a point-blank shot through the head. Larkin, who had been firing with a six-gun, got another through the body.

The astonished Kiowas, who, one moment were intent on looting a wa-

gon, suddenly found themselves jumped by what appeared to be a cavalry troop, and disregarding their dead, they raced away across the plain, into the concealment of what was now almost total darkness.

The one dismounted warrior was dashing toward the fallen boy. Martin was not fifteen feet away when his carbine blasted and the Kiowa dropped with a bullet through his back.

The four soldiers automatically realized the futility of pursuit in the darkness. Martin dismounted and called out:

"Larkin and Masterson! Take a look at the kid with me. Chester, you see if anybody is alive in the wagon."

The troopers did as they were ordered.

Sergeant Martin bent down on one knee before the figure of the boy. It was apparent he was only stunned, for in a moment, his eyes were fluttering and he started to sit erect.

"Pa," he murmured, "Did we make . . . ?"

He broke off as he realized that his dad was dead. The events in the wagon came back to him.

"Don't worry, son," Martin said. "We're troopers and we're goin' to take you back to Fort Hodges with us. What's your name?"

"Jimmie Gladdon. Pa an' me was goin' to Fort Hodges too. Pa had a job promised him. An' I was goin' to school. Someday I'm goin' to be a soldier too."

The lean and sunburnt sergeant smiled down at him. "It's all right, son, you'll be a good soldier."

The short, fat trooper, Chester, stepped up the little group.

"There's a dead man in the wagon," he said. "The rats got him right through the head. It's a bloody—"

"Shut up!" Martin shouted at him angrily. "This is his kid. Chester, you and Martin dig a grave, and call me when you're ready."

Jimmie seemed to have forgotten where he was or what had happened. He was staring into the dense night and there was a peculiar look on his face. He turned toward Martin and

his eyes were dry:

"I'm goin' to take a horse an' a gun, an' I'm going to get me a Kiowa fer Pa." He said it calmly and with all the confidence in the world.

"Son," Martin said gently, "You're coming with us to Fort Hodges. When you get a little more meat on you, you can do all the Kiowa hunting you want. Besides, how long do you think you'd last tonight? Those braves haven't gone far, and I wouldn't be surprised if they came back tonight. Take it easy, son, your Pa'll get his revenge."

The boy avoided the sergeant's eyes.

Masterson said:

"Well, Martin, don't you think we better stake ourselves here? We need a little grub."

"Right," Martin answered. "Get it ready and call the boys over. We'll give the kid a taste of rations. How'd you like a cup of coffee, Jimmie?"

He said it so kindly, that Jimmie was forced to smile. "Thanks."

Masterson started work on the chow. Jimmie simply sat and stared at the fire, while the troopers were digging the grave a hundred feet away. The full realization that his dad was dead was there, but the sense of loss was so overwhelming, that he dared not go near the body for fear he'd cry. And Jimmie Gladdon didn't cry—ever.

Martin remounted his horse and toured the area. It was pretty well open land except for that slight rise that the troopers had ridden over, but the moonless darkness, meant that there was always a chance that they could be surprised. He rode over a half-mile making sure that nothing was in range.

Sergeant Martin was an experienced Indian fighter and he knew that somewhere in the distance, a group of braves was watching that campfire. It made him nervous but at the same time it implied no fear. They'd eat and maybe move on a little later.

HE WENT back to the camp, thinking about the kid. He had

gumption all right. He wasn't letting a tear get by his eyes even though, inside he must have been torn apart. The whole thing had probably been a lark to him, even up to the point where the Kiowa had gotten his Pa. A ten year old doesn't have much fear in him, but there's plenty of grief when he finally realizes he's alone. Well, thought Martin, the kid'll get it out of his system sometime. Meanwhile let him put up the brave front. It furnished a distraction from the present danger of a second Kiowa attack.

Martin rolled a cigarette and sucked on it meditatively. When he got back to the fire where rations had already been prepared by Masterson, he watched Jimmie wolf his food.

"Like it, son?" he asked. "It'll put some sleep in you too. Now listen, men—" he turned toward the three troopers—"I'll take the first two-hour watch, then Masterson, then Larkin, and then Chester, and then me again, and we'll move early. If the horses were watered and rested, I'd move on now, but we can't take a chance on tuckerin' 'em too much. And the kid could use a little shut-eye too. You got it right?"

The four men and the forlorn-looking boy ate quickly and in a moment the fire was extinguished, the ashes and embers ground out and three men were snoring in their blankets, their horses tethered twenty feet away. Jimmie lay a little apart from the others, wrapped up tightly but not asleep.

He was tired but there were too many images going through his mind. His mother's face haunted him and he remembered the anguish he had felt at her death. Now Pa was gone, and his loneliness was multiplied a hundred-fold. Still it wasn't quite clear.

The thought that stood out above all, in the kaleidoscope that was his unformed mind, was that of a grinning Indian face, a hideously painted Kiowa, mounted and speeding like mad toward the rear of a wagon. If he could only smash that face! He wanted to shoot and beat Kiowas. As

he thought of the idea, it obsessed him. He turned over in the blanket and almost sobbed.

As he turned, his eye caught the stalwart figure of Sergeant Martin slowly walking in a large circle about the camp, a rifle dangling from one arm. Involuntarily he felt a surge of warmth toward the soldier who had almost behaved like Pa to him.

It was possible to see only the outlines of the man. The darkness was intense. Jimmie sat up. The sound of snoring troopers beat against his eardrums. How loud they seemed. On a blanket near them lay carbines and six-guns. They had left their sabers on the still-saddled horses.

Kiowa—horse—gun. The connection came immediately to Jimmie's mind. Why should he go to Fort Hodges? Here was a chance to go after the Kiowas. From what Sergeant Martin had said, he knew that there were undoubtedly plenty of Kiowas in the vicinity. This was chance to revenge Pa! And he was going to take it.

He waited until Martin had completed another round of the camp and was as far away as possible. The realization suddenly came to him that he could not take a horse. The noise would give him away.

He crawled from under the blankets and approached the pile of weapons. He picked a carbine—a lever-action Winchester-issue — from the stack and a cartridge pouch. The gun was heavy but no heavier than the Sharps he had had so much practice with. With the judgment of a person driven by a great compulsion, Jimmie selected a canteen full of water and some jerked beef, the iron ration they'd had earlier.

He rose to his feet. The horses and the broken-down wagon were between Martin and himself. Now was his chance! He hunched over to make himself as inconspicuous as possible and headed a little to the southeast where his chance of being seen was least, and which was the same direction into which the Kiowas had disappeared. As fast as his legs would carry him, without a sound and with

the stealth of an Indian Jimmie put space between himself and the improvised camp-site. His little mind was in a ferment. He hated to leave the soldiers who had been so kind to him, especially Sergeant Martin, but something told him he had to revenge Pa's death by getting a Kiowa scalp. The thought of such action kept his mind from his father's death and child-like, Jimmie was a boy hunting Indians.

IN TEN minutes of steady walking he was well over the hillock that served to shield the camp-site from that direction. In this night it would be hard for anyone to spot him. The events of the day had tuckered him but not to the point where he didn't know exactly where he was going.

Hard it might be, but he was going to push himself into sight of a Kiowa and show him what a son he was. At the killing pace he was traveling, in less than three-quarters of an hour, he had put well over a half-mile between himself and the camp. Still he wasn't missed.

There was a little rise in the ground where he had gotten, and he could tell it by the effort it took to walk. His breath was coming faster. He decided to slow down.

His head hung a little and his eyes scanned the ground in front of him. Out of nothing five feet away from him, Jimmie found himself staring into the face of a startled Kiowa warrior, half-asleep but in full war-paint and awakening fast!

The Kiowa was as startled as Jimmie. He had been watching the camp, but it was the farthest thought from his mind that he'd see the boy here. He let out a shriek, and at the same instant reached for his knife.

Startled, Jimmie saw only a screaming blur. He did not react according to reason. He jerked to rigidity. The carbine muzzle came up and he squeezed the trigger unconsciously. The heavy bullet caught the brave squarely in the face. His knife dropped a foot away from the boy and the brave tumbled backward, his war-paint a splattered mass of blood.

Jimmie was terror-stricken. The shock was jarring him into insensibility. All he could think of was Sergeant Martin.

"Sergeant Martin! Sergeant Martin!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. There was no answer. He looked at the ground around him and in the dim light he could see that the Kiowa had been alone. There was no horse tethered near nor hoofprints. The Indian had been scouting on foot.

As the initial shock and terror passed momentarily, Jimmie realized what he'd done. Pa would have liked what happened. Jimmie bent down and picked up the keen-edged knife. With an instinct old as time itself, he looked at it proudly, thrust it into his belt and recovered his dropped carbine. He levered another cartridge into the chamber. There was almost a swagger to his walk. He started back the way he had come . . .

MARTIN had an uncomfortable feeling. He knew that there were Kiowas around somewhere and every minute that they remained at this camp, was a minute in which they could be easily attacked.

So musing he walked back to the huddle of sleeping figures. The three troopers were still snoring lustily. He looked at the heaped-up blanket where Jimmie was. There was no boy!

"Damn!" he muttered, and saw the tracks leading from the camp. He shook Masterson by the shoulder.

"Wake up," he said. "The fool kid beat it. He left us. I'm takin' a horse and going after him. He can't go far. He must be around—if the Kiowas . . ."

He left the sentence unfinished. Still rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Masterson slammed erect, picked a carbine and took up the post.

In a minute, without awakening the others, Sergeant Martin was in the saddle. He rode slowly, scanning the ground before him. The breeze was too light to obscure the footprints in the brief time that Jimmie had been gone and Martin was able to follow them easily.

Suddenly he heard the sharp crack of the carbine and out of the corner of his eye he saw the flash of fire. In an instant he had put spurs to his horse and was racing toward the spot.

"Jimmie!" he shouted at the top of his lungs at the same time unlimbering his own carbine. "Jimmie! Call out, boy."

Then he saw the boy. He was standing right on top of him.

"What happened, son? Where are they?" he questioned as he bent from the saddle and scooped the boy up. Jimmie struggled free. He was trembling.

"I just shot a Kiowa like I tol' Pa. I wisht he was here. I ain't afraid, Sergeant Martin. Come on back an' look." In fearful, yet proud tones, the boy related the affair.

"—an when he popped up in front of me, I just squeezed the trigger, an' got 'im right in the face. He's dead," he finished simply.

Martin tried to peer through the darkness. There must be more of the devils around. They'd have to get out of there in a hurry. He just glanced superficially at the body which they had come upon.

"Come on up, boy. We've got to get out of here," he said to Jimmie.

Still clinging to his carbine and almost bursting with pride from his frequent glances at the Kiowa's knife, Jimmie swung up behind Martin and the soldier prodded the horse into a quick trot.

Up until now he hadn't said much. He finally turned to the boy as they were approaching the camp.

"Jimmie," he said in a friendly but firm voice. "We're taking you to Fort Hodges with us. We want to get there in our scalps. Do you know that we can be ambushed anytime? You shouldn't have run away from the camp like you did. What'd your Pa think if he knew?" He looked back severely at the boy.

"I didn't mean no harm, Sergeant Martin," Jimmie said, abashed. "I just had to get away from camp. I couldn't sleep. I miss Pa." His lower lip trembled and it looked as if he

were ready to burst into tears. But he fought them back.

"Well we can forget about it for now. But don't leave the troop whatever happens." He looked at the boy sternly. "Son, you want to be a soldier and we're going to make one out of you. But the first thing that a good soldier does, is obey orders. Got that right?"

"Yes—yes sir," Jimmie stuttered, and for the first time since the afternoon's events, a ghost of a smile hovered over his face.

In the absolute blackness they finally reached the camp where they were stopped a hundred feet away by the fully awakened troopers. Sergeant Martin explained what had happened when they were admitted.

"... and," he finished, "the kid dropped a full war-painted Kiowa with a shot right through the face. How's that for luck? Show 'em your knife, son."

Proudly the boy displayed his war trophy and to sympathetic ears he told of his shooting of the Kiowa. The soldiers commented admiringly.

"Who'd you reckon was the most scared, Jimmie?" Chester, the fat one of the patrol asked. "You or the Kiowa?"

"I wasn't scared," Jimmie shot back. "I didn't expect no Kiowa!"

Chester laughed. "I'm only jokin', son. You're a real fighter."

Sergeant Martin broke up the talk.

"Men," he said, "I'll bet my stripes that there're Kiowas around here, and it won't be long before we know about it. Let's saddle up and move. We've got to put some space between us and this spot. This is too open for me. Of course—" he went on reflectively, "—we can't be ambushed either."

"Maybe not," said Masterson, "but they don't need to ambush us. Four men and a boy ain't a big crowd. And don't forget, they all got new repeaters too. I'd like to murder the dogs who give 'em to them."

WITHOUT further discussion they saddled up, filled their saddle bags with their brief supplies

and the four men with Jimmie riding beside Sergeant Martin in the lead, they headed west toward Fort Hodges.

The horses were tired, thirsty and foot-sore, and it wasn't easy to get them to move. Nor did they really want to. The poor brutes wouldn't be able to take much more pushing. But they got into a slow and steady pace. They rode for well over an hour, the trail remaining unchanged, except in spots more discernible by virtue of the great amounts of brush. Otherwise it was flat desert-like territory and it would be about the same all the way to the Fort. There was no shelter or protection anywhere. A few slight hills and ridges were all, and these were not suitable for any sort of a prolonged stay.

The little party went on for another hour, muffled conversation between Jimmie and Sergeant Martin mingling with the soft clomp of the hooves. The other troopers were practically asleep in their saddles.

Jimmie, in spite of his exhaustion was stimulated by his shooting of the Kiowa and he told Martin all about himself. In the Sergeant he subconsciously detected a man like his father, even though so much younger.

In turn, Martin told him about Army life and how he'd like it at Fort Hodges. He told him of the patrols that were constantly being sent out and of the interesting garrison life. He predicted that after Jimmie had some schooling he'd make a good soldier and he'd even get a commission.

"My Pa told me the same thing," Jimmie said solemnly. "But I don't want to be an officer. I just want to be a common sergeant—like you," he finished.

Sergeant Martin laughed. Jimmie looked puzzled.

"It's not so bad at that," Martin said. "But we're still going to see that you get some education, young fellow. Besides you'll like Miss Wison—she teaches the Post school. She's a nice girl and I want you to be on your best behavior when you meet her."

By dint of much conversation in a similar vein, Martin was able to keep Jimmie's mind occupied with his radical change in life, and the thoughts of the horrible events of the day were rapidly fading from the boy's mind. A child has a resilience no adult can approach, and because Jimmie was encountering so many new things, he had half forgotten the shock and horror, though the grief would undoubtedly remain for a long time.

The patrol had reached a particularly open spot, not too easily seen because of the lack of light, and the senses of everyone were dulled by fatigue and the slow plodding of the horses.

Suddenly, the sharp report of a rifle came through the cool night, and Masterson, bringing up the rear cursed in pain.

"Damn!" he cried. "Shoulder — light," and he toppled from his horse.

With the crack of the rifle, Martin's mind went into the lightning action that characterized him.

"Dismount!" he roared, "and shoot the horses—get 'em in a circle!"

Even as he pulled Jimmie from the saddle, his issue Colt was blazing into the darkness as were the carbines of Chester and Larkin. Masterson was lying on the ground propping himself up painfully and trying to fire his weapon.

There was no answering fire. In a few minutes, the troopers had the five horses arranged in a crude sort of a circle, bellies out and on their sides with bullets through their heads.

Carbines were placed over the crude barricade so formed and the little party, weary, but now alert, waited for the inevitable attack. They could see practically nothing, but they knew Kiowas were out there. Masterson's shoulder testified to that.

Jimmie crouched behind one of the horses, feeling proud and scared at the same time, of his new-found responsibility.

Masterson placed his small force in positions to cover them from all

sides. They had plenty of ammunition and he wasn't worried on that score. What bothered him was the size of the bushwhacking party. If there were many braves in it, and it was likely, they'd be dead soldiers. They could stop a pretty good attack, but . . .

FOR A LONG while they lay, nervous and tense and expectant for the attack to materialize. Over the eastern horizon there was the faintest glimmering of dawn, but no attack came.

"Anybody who can sleep, better try," said Martin. "We're going to be here a long time. And we'll need sleep. I'm standing this watch."

"Who wants to sleep?" Masterson said sardonically, and his face twisted with pain as he moved his wounded shoulder. He didn't know whether or not the bullet had nicked bone.

"When Captain Tenor's patrol picks us up," said Chester, "we'll get plenty of sleep."

"We'll be dead by then, gloomily interjected Larkin.

"That's what I mean," Chester answered. "He takes his time. By the time he picks us up we'll be bodies."

"Cut that kind of talk," Martin interrupted savagely. "We're going to hold out, that's all, till he gets to us."

"Remember? We ain't been attacked yet," Masterson said.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when he saw the dots come racing across the prairie. There were about forty of them and they were coming as fast as their ponies would carry them.

Martin levered a cartridge into the Winchester's chamber.

"I don't have to tell you to make every shot count. Fire fast," he said. "But aim. We've got plenty of ammunition but we can't afford to waste it. Fire when you think they're close enough to hit. Aim at the horses too; they're bigger targets." He turned to Jimmie who was watching the oncoming horsemen with a mixture of awe and fear on his face.

"Son," Martin went on, "I want you to be careful. Keep your head

down. A horse'll stop a bullet."

"Can't I shoot, too, Sergeant? I killed a Kiowa already," the boy asked hesitantly.

"You can shoot, son, but be careful and remember, don't fire at nothing."

"I won't," Jimmie answered and he bent his head carefully to the ludicrously large stock of the carbine. Yet as Martin looked at him, he could see that the boy somehow fitted into the picture perfectly.

He turned back to the approaching danger. In the light of the rapidly brightening dawn, he could clearly see that this war party was ready for business. Already their rifles were spitting. With traditional inaccuracy their fire was going overhead; in fact, their fire was hopelessly inadequate when they were mounted.

The three men capable of handling carbines and the boy, were carefully taking aim. Martin gave the definite command.

"Fire when you want to, now, they're close enough."

Martin's line of sight rested on a screaming brave who had stopped firing and was waving his rifle and screaming. The distance lessened. Martin fired. With a hideous shriek, the man toppled from his pony. The animal raced wildly across the plain.

With that well-placed and lucky shot the soldiers began firing steadily. Here and there a pony or a man would be dropped because the range was narrowing quickly. The fierce cries of the warriors added to the sharp crack of rifle-fire, but now the bullets were coming close. The charge did not stop.

As the foolishly close-knit bunch of horsemen thundered closer to the fallen-horse barricade, it began to break up and each warrior went for himself, riding in a wildly gyrating circle around the soldiers' position. All the while they fired indiscriminately. Occasionally a bullet thudded into the wall formed by the head horses but did no harm.

Martin and Chester and Larkin fired as fast and as accurately as they could and their fire had a telling

effect. A dozen Indians had been killed in just the approach, and now that they were so dangerously close they were beginning to drop like flies.

"They can't keep it up much longer," Chester said wearily and in spite of the cool morning air he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"They'll pull back soon, I think," Masterson said, wincing as he moved his wounded shoulder. "They're getting their bellies full right now."

"They'll hunker down into the ground and behind hillocks just within range and snipe at us until they think they've knocked us out and try it again," Martin said. He squeezed off a shot.

WITHIN ten minutes after the attack had begun, the Kiowas were pulling out. They made no effort to recover their dead or wounded but left them lie. The purpose, of course, was simple. They stationed a warrior here and there behind a dead horse and used him as an advance post. Then they withdrew as fast as they came.

Martin knew what this meant. There was no chance to lift a head above the level of their dead horse's bellies. They would be sniped at all day. Movement would be restricted and that was sheer torture out here in the open without any shelter from the sun which was already climbing too fast.

Martin turned toward Jimmie.

He had kept an eye on him all during the skirmish, but the kid had very coolly continued to load and fire. He couldn't say for sure whether or not he'd gotten any, but from the volume of fire he'd delivered, he felt as if he had.

"Jimmie," Sergeant Martin said, "did you shoot any more?" He emphasized the "more."

"I think I hit two of 'em, Sergeant," Jimmie said excitedly. "And I'm gonna get me more. I hate 'em. They killed Pa." He made a fierce face suddenly and Martin had to conceal his amusement at the boy's intensity.

Then they settled down for the siege. Martin carefully attended to

Masterson's wounded shoulder, but there wasn't much he could do for it. Already it was getting blue and puffy and when the sun really started to beat down he knew that the man was going to be in for a bad time. Nevertheless, he bandaged it with strips of torn shirt as best he could. He gave the wounded man a little water and a piece of biscuit and hoped he would be able to last it out. There wasn't too much hope that Tenor's patrol would find them, especially since he didn't know they were in danger. Their only hope was that a patrol, Tenor's or a passing stranger's, would find the remains of the wagon and start to investigate. Their trail was clear enough.

Martin collected and conserved their limited supplies of water and food. There wasn't much and it might have to last for a long time. He gave everybody a drink of water and carefully pointed out how it would have to be rationed. Only Chester noticed that he gave his own portion to Jimmie very slyly so that the boy wouldn't realize that he'd done it.

The four men and the boy began to realize the seriousness of their position as the morning grew. The sun climbed quickly and soon it was beating down with a ferociousness and intensity that were unbelievable. Added to the misery of the heat and the innumerable sand-flies, flies and mosquitoes that were collecting, was the stench of the horses, becoming high fast. From the prairie - desert came no sound, even though there were a half dozen Kiowas crouched behind the bodies of the dead animals that lay a couple of hundred yards away. The Indians could lay there forever completely unperturbed by their position and filled with a terrifying patience and cynicism.

The morning wore on. Conversation was negligible. No one felt like talking, especially from parched throats and mouths.

The cramped awkwardness of their position became apparent when they tried to shift about even a little bit. They dared not lift their heads very high.

Experimentally, Martin lifted his broad-brimmed hat. There was the whistle of a bullet, followed by the sharp flat report of a carbine. It wasn't a very good shot but it was enough to worry about. Even the worst marksman can't always miss.

Several times, to test the watchfulness of the besiegers, Martin raised his hat. Each time it brought forth an answering shot. Occasionally all of the red devils out there would fire at once, sending a fusillade of lead into the horses and overhead.

There was nothing to do but wait. Once in a great while, Chester, who was an excellent shot, would poke his weapon between the bodies of the horses and let go a shot at one of the dead animals in front of them. But without any tangible results. The Kiowas are a proud and stoical race, and even if a hit had been scored, they would never yell from pain.

IN THE midafternoon the attack finally began. Everyone of the five was half-dozing when there was the rumble of hooves on the ground and two small clouds appeared. At the same time, the prone Kiowas began firing rapidly with complete abandon.

Two groups of racing Kiowas, each about ten men, approached the small and battered party. Sergeant Martin realized that this was it. The tired beaten men and the willing but weary Jimmie fired steadily at the onrushing horsemen. But the Kiowas had spread out considerably and it was no longer a matter of firing at a bunch. Weaving and racing forward the swiftly oncoming warriors were pouring lead at the little encampment. This fire coupled with the shots of the prone snipers made it almost impossible for the white men to shoot accurately.

Chester rose a little too high above

the stinking body of the horse that sheltered him. He gave a funny little cry and then slid down again. Martin cursed. The blood was pouring from a neat little hole that chance and a Kiowa had put in his throat.

This time, Martin knew, as certainly as he knew anything, that they were never going to make Fort Hodges. Then suddenly, over and above the shrill cries of the circling Kiowas came another note—high and shrill, it dominated all sounds.

It was a bugle!

The Kiowas who had been crouching behind dead horses jumped up and madly tried to double up with the strangely broken-up attackers. As fast as they could fire, Martin and Larkin poured lead into the now-fleeing Indians.

And in the distance, racing like welcome angels came a long thin blue line. Puffs of smoke came from it and Martin knew that Captain Tenor's men had found the trail. Chester had died a few minutes too soon.

Sergeant Martin turned again to Jimmie. The boy was staring wide-eyed at the oncoming soldiers. There was no fear, or even remembrance of yesterday's events in his eyes. He had gone through too much.

Martin put an arm around the boy's thin shoulders:

"Jimmie," he said, "We'll get to Fort Hodges today, and you're not going to be fighting anybody tomorrow. Do you know where you'll be?"

"Yes, sir," Jimmie answered.

"Where?" asked Martin.

"In school at Fort Hodges." His face frowned, then wrinkled into a smile. He started to laugh. Martin looked at him and started to laugh too.

"Wait'll the kids find out . . ." Jimmie said. "Just wait. . . ."

THE END

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DESTRUCTION OF THE BUFFALO



BY H. R. STANTON



THE destruction of the buffalo by the white men was one of the main causes of the Indian warfare that raged for many years over the Great Plains. Buffalo meat was their main food, and when they saw it being uselessly destroyed, they became savage. To punish the Indian tribes who had turned hostile, wholesale slaughter of the buffalo was encouraged. Professional buffalo killers nearly exterminated the animals.

After the Civil War, the railroads began to work their way into the west. Bands of hunters armed with repeating rifles went out to get hides that sold for three dollars a piece. The plains were littered with sinned carcasses and rotting flesh. At one time there were fifty thousand hides piled in the freight yards of Dodge City. Settlers who took up land from the government on the plains after the Indian wars were over, found the ground covered with bleached buffalo bones. Their first pay-crop may well have been found in the bones

they had to gather before planting their crops. The bones brought from six to eight dollars a ton, and were used in carbon works in the East. One old fellow, nicknamed "Old Buffalo Bones", made a fortune gathering up skulls and skeletons. He started out with a wagon and a team of horses, and hauled his load to the nearest railroad track. Everyone thought that he was a bit crazy to be shipping old bones back east in empty box cars at a low freight rate, but when they learned that he was making good money, they were quick to follow his example. Within thirteen years, two and one half million dollars was paid to Kansas alone for this product of the plains. It took nearly one hundred buffalo to make a ton of bones, and within three years about three and one half million pounds of bones were sent over the Santa Fe. These facts suggest something of the magnitude of the destruction which nearly wiped the buffalo off the face of the earth.



EARLY CALIFORNIA ROUNDUP



BY FRAN FERRIS



DOWN to the time of the Gold Rush, the economic life of California was based on the cattle industry. A few hundred head of stock brought from Mexico by the early colonists multiplied into thousands before the end of the eighteenth century. Hundreds of miles of grazing land was required to feed the herds of a single mission. The stock was grass-fed the year around and ran wild on the open ranges.

Cattlemen were required to have three registered brands; the iron, the ear mark, and the sale brand. Once a year the rancheros held a general roundup in order to segregate the cattle belonging to different owners, and to brand the new calves. It was an occasion of gaiety and hospitality as neighboring landowners and friends and relatives of the ranchero traveled many days and nights to take part in the games, dancing, riding, gambling, horse-racing, cock-fighting, and bear and bull-baiting.

To keep the maddened, bewildered cattle from stampeding, cowboys kept riding around the herd, trying to hold it together. Whenever an animal broke out, the cowboy roped him or gave his tail a peculiar twist

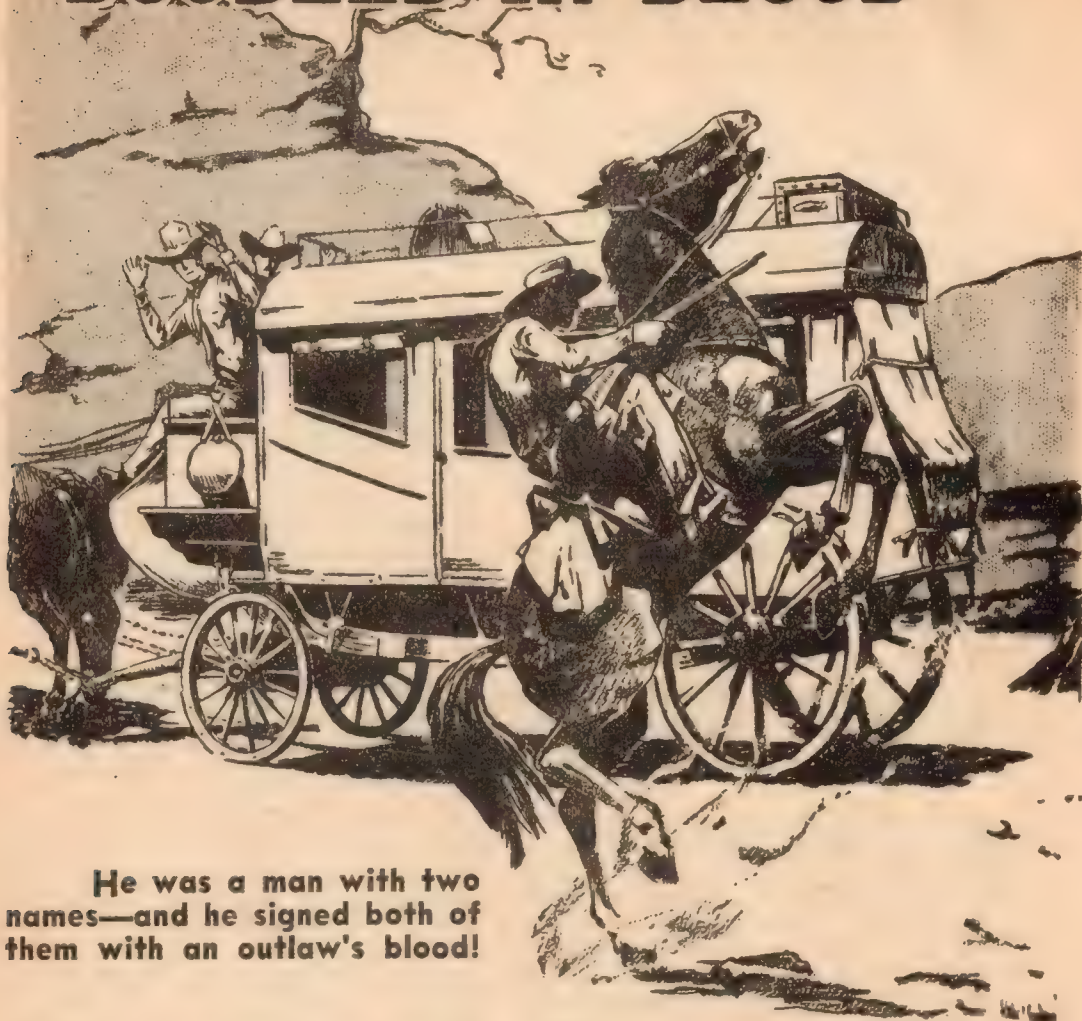
in order to throw him to the ground. The cattle owners kept riding in and out of the herd, separating those that wore his particular brand from the rest of the herd. The calves followed their mothers and when they were all separated into their own herds, the rancher branded his calves and decided how many he could profitably slaughter. Then all the herds were allowed to go back together.

These roundups were the most picturesque event of early California life. These large herds might cover two square miles and clouds of dust rose high in the air from thousands of wild feet.

Cattle furnished the chief source of wealth, trade, food and occupation. The beef was cut into strips and dried. This was the basic article in their diet. Tallow gave them cooking fat and grease used in making soap and candles. The rawhide had many uses from bridles to bedsprings. The exports of tallow, horns and hides gave California her almost only contact with the outside world during her time as a province of Mexico.



DOUBLED IN BLOOD



He was a man with two names—and he signed both of them with an outlaw's blood!

FOR a long time there was only the darkness—deep and soft and without end. And then, as though from a vast distance, voices muttered. They grew louder, closer, and next Stuart became aware of light beating against his closed eyes.

He opened them. He was staring into the light, trying to focus his vision, when the pain came. It came like a pair of giant hands that squeezed his skull slowly and remorselessly.

Stuart groaned and raised a strangely feeble hand toward his head. It was then that he discovered the bandages. There seemed to be a lot of them.

Shocked, alarm a wildfire spreading through him, Stuart tried to sit up. He felt the frame of a cot under his clutching fingers, felt taut canvas fabric stiffen under his tensing muscles. A face materialized suddenly in his line of sight. Palms pressed against his shoulders, gently forcing

by Guy Archette



As the bullet hit the strong box the top seemed to explode in a roaring blast of sound . . .

him back.

"Take it easy, son. You got to rest. You were hurt pretty bad."

A face and a voice he recognized now. He knew old Doc Baines. And suddenly he was recalling another face — dark, sharp-featured, and predatory. The face of Hawk Dubois. He saw a cruel smile twist that face, saw a rifle butt swinging down. He remembered trying to duck, and the brief, overwhelming pain that had dissolved his mind in blackness.

The memory went as Stuart realized that people were standing before the cot. He found himself looking up at Walt Braden, Morris Purdy, and —and Lona. There were a few others in the background, but he paid them no further attention, his eyes fixing upon the girl.

He felt his pulses quicken as they always seemed to do at sight of Lona Braden. She smiled and came closer, bending over the cot.

"How do you feel?"

"Getting better already," Stuart said. His gaze went from her smoky-gray eyes and red lips to the shining coppery hair that hung in tumbled curls about her slender shoulders. He didn't overlook the freckles that powdered the bridge of her small, straight nose. His inventory confirmed something of which he had been convinced for a long time—that Lona was the prettiest and nicest girl in all Eagle Creek.

His thought gave way before a surge of insistent questions. He asked, "How did I get here?"

"A couple of punchers brought you in," Lona said. "They found you unconscious up at South Pass. Hank Grover was . . . dead. And the stage was robbed."

"Yes—robbed!" another voice cut

in. Walt Braden pushed his way forward. He was a straight, fine-featured man with Lona's own shade of coppery hair. "A fine shotgun messenger you turned out to be! Ten thousand in bullion—lost! You got a lot of explaining to do, Jim Stuart, and you better do it fast!"

Stuart frowned up at Braden. Ordinarily he felt a deep respect for the Superintendent of the Eagle Creek division of Imperial Stage Lines. For Braden was Stuart's boss, and Lona's father as well. But now Braden's words bewildered Stuart.

"I don't get it," he muttered. "Who's Jim Stuart? My name's Jud Silver."

"Jud Silver!" Braden stared "Say, what are you trying to pull off? You know as well as I do that you're Jim Stuart."

"There must be some mistake," Stuart insisted. "I'm not trying to pull anything off. All I know is that I'm Jud Silver."

"Jim, what's the matter with you?" Lona demanded abruptly. "You're Jim Stuart. I know you are —and so does everyone else. You just can't be Jud Silver. Why, Jud Silver is a famous marshal. Everyone has heard about him."

STUART closed his eyes, and momentarily the division office was blotted from sight. He tried to think through the waves of pain that pounded through his head. Jim Stuart . . . Jim Stuart . . . An unfamiliar person. He knew the faces that he had seen gathered around him. He had known their names. But he somehow couldn't remember anyone named Jim Stuart.

It was clear that he should. Both Walt Braden and Lona insisted he

was that man. Yet his storehouse of memories could produce nothing to bear out the claim. He was Jud Silver. As far as he knew, he had always been Jud Silver.

He became aware of a voice speaking—speaking softly, as though to keep him from hearing. It was Doc Baines' voice.

"Jim had a mighty bad scalp wound. Looked as if he'd been hit real hard with something. Funny things happen in cases like that."

Braden spoke suddenly, with no effort at concealment. "You mean it might have made him forget who he was?"

"Exactly. The injury did something to his brain—formed a blood clot blocking certain memory centers, most likely. It's buried his own identity and made him believe he's Jud Silver. Wish I could figure out how in the world he happened to choose that name."

"I think I know, Doc." Braden's voice again. "Jim just about worshipped Jud Silver. Ate up everything he heard about him. Talked about him all the time. That's why he begged me to give him the job as shotgun messenger. He hoped to get Hawk Dubois and become famous like Jud Silver. But it looks like Hawk Dubois beat Jim to the draw."

Lona said impulsively, "Doc—do you think Jim will ever get over believing that he's Jud Silver?"

"It's hard to say," Baines returned. "If there's actually a clot, it might go away by itself. But if it doesn't . . . well, a brain specialist back East might be able to fix him up. But it would be mighty dangerous—too dangerous to try, I reckon."

"But if Jim has to stay . . . the way he is—" Lona's voice broke off.

She looked down at her slender hands, lower lip caught between her teeth.

With an effort that made his head roar sickeningly, Stuart raised himself up on an elbow. "I wish you folks would stop talking about me like I was a locoed steer."

There was an abrupt chuckle. Morris Purdy's handsome, blond features held a thinly veiled expression of triumph. He was a few years older than Stuart, his husky figure fashionably dressed, as befitted his duties as cashier of the Eagle Creek division.

"That's an idea—considering as how you're only a locoed shotgun messenger!" Purdy said.

Stuart studied the other's smiling face gravely. "Coming from you, Purdy, that's a real compliment. You wouldn't have guts enough to be a shotgun messenger — even if you were locoed."

Purdy's smile vanished. "Maybe you need another good clout over the head."

"Boys — please!" Lona's small features were distressed. "Do you two always have to keep snapping at each other?"

STUART sank back upon the cot, a sudden worry in his mind. Lona evidently was too sweet to admit that she was the cause of the constant bickering between Purdy and himself. Up to this time, Stuart had felt certain that he held the edge over the cashier. But now he realized that the strange misunderstanding over his identity might give Purdy an advantage. The thought of losing Lona was anything but a pleasant one. Stuart had made far too many plans for the girl and himself.

Braden waved his hands impa-

tiently. "Now keep quiet, all of you! Can't you remember that a valuable shipment has been lost?" He whirled back to the cot. "You've still got an explanation to make, Jim Stuart. And believe me, it better be good!"

Stuart said, "My name—"

"I don't care if your name's Lucifer!" Braden roared. "All I want out of you is an explanation. What happened to that bullion shipment? Was it Hawk Dubois as usual? How did he get the drop on you? And how did Hank Grover get killed?"

Stuart closed his eyes, striving to order the confusion in his mind. He began to speak slowly.

"Hank and I were going through South Pass when we saw somebody lying in the road. Hank had to stop the coach so we wouldn't run the other person over. There was a saddled horse not far away, lying like it had broken its legs. Looked as if some kind of accident had happened.

"I gave Hank my shotgun, and climbed down to investigate. Things didn't look suspicious. No outsiders could've known we were carrying bullion. And besides, the person that was lying in the road was a woman."

"A woman!" Braden gasped.

"It looked like a woman at first," Stuart added. "But the whole thing was a trick. It was a man with woman's clothes on. I found that out when I tried to turn him around. He jumped up sudden-like and swung at me. I heard a gun go off as I went down. Hawk Dubois had his men planted around the rocks in the Pass, and one of them shot Hank.

"Well, that sock I got didn't lay me out, but everything was sort of foggy. Next I knew, somebody grabbed me by the arms and pulled

me up. I saw Hawk Dubois in front of me—not two feet away. It was all over by that time. Dubois had the bullion, and he and his killers were getting ready to ride.

"Dubois was feeling pretty good. He said some things to me that I won't repeat, 'count of Miss Lona is here. He was poking fun at me for being taken in by that stunt of his. I guess I said some things back. Anyhow, Dubois had a rifle with him, and he swung it at me quicker than you can bat an eye. That's all I remember. Reckon Dubois thought I was dead which is why he didn't put a bullet in me."

"He should've known you had a thick skull after fooling you the way he did!" Braden grunted.

"But I couldn't have known—I mean, it looked like a woman."

"I know, I know," Braden said irritably. "I'll admit it was a clever trick. Guess I'd have been fooled myself. But that isn't going to get us the bullion back. And there's going to be hell to pay at the home office."

STUART said quickly, "Maybe it isn't too late. I could try to follow Dubois from the tracks left at South Pass. There was only him and four other men, including the one who was dressed like a woman. It's dead certain Dubois has a hideout somewhere in the mountains, and not very far from town."

"You aren't going to do anything like that, boy," Doc Baines broke in, his voice gruff. "You got to rest."

"And besides," Braden returned, "you wouldn't have any more luck finding Dubois than Sheriff Lundstret and his deputies. The Sheriff's tried a dozen times to track Dubois down."

"The Sheriff?" Stuart snorted. "It's different when Jud Silver goes after a man."

"But you aren't—" Braden started to argue. Then he pressed his lips together tightly and shrugged.

Stuart became grimly sincere. "I mean just what I said. I'm going to get Hawk Dubois. One way or another, I'm going to make him pay for what he did. He's going to find out what happens when he tangles with Jud Silver!"

Morris Purdy threw back his head and laughed.

"Oh, Jim!" Lona cried. "How many times do you have to be told that you're not Jud Silver?"

"But, Lona—"

Doc Baines said quickly, "That's enough, Jim . . . er, Jud. I told you that you got to rest—and by heaven, you're going to rest! You aren't in any condition to be arguing with people. Now you come along with me. I have my buggy outside, and I'll drive you to where you live."

Assisted by Baines, Stuart left the division office, his sun-browned, lean features pinched in a grimace of pain. Lona, Braden, Purdy, and the others watched from the doorway as he climbed weakly into the buggy. He managed a grin and a wave of one hand, then Baines was reining the horse into motion.

"Now you listen to me, son," Baines said as he drove toward the boarding house where Stuart lived in lieu of a home. "You may be convinced that you're Jud Silver, but that isn't going to cut any ice with other folks. You'd make things a lot easier for yourself if you'd say you were Jim Stuart like they claim."

"But, Doc, if I'm Jud Silver, I don't see any sense in saying I'm some-

body else."

"It's usually best to go along with what most folks think, even if you know they're wrong. Saves a lot of wear and tear, if you get what I mean."

"I don't see it that way, Doc. Being Jud Silver is nothing to be ashamed of."

"You mean you're going to go around insisting that you're Jud Silver?"

"As long as folks force me to do it, Doc."

Baines shook his graying head sadly. "You're letting yourself in for a heap of trouble, son—a heap of trouble."

Chapter II

THE morning sunlight felt good on Stuart's face. Standing on the steps of Mrs. Tolliver's boarding house, he breathed deeply of the crisp air. It was a day for doing things, he decided. First and foremost was to see Walt Braden about his job.

A week of inactivity lay behind Stuart, and he was impatient to resume his old duties. He had tried to get back to work long before, but Doc Baines had insisted that he rest. It hadn't been until just the other day that the old medico had pronounced him well enough to bear the jolts and bounces of a moving Concord.

Stuart was worried. He wasn't entirely certain that Braden would give him back his job. Of course, Braden had more or less admitted that Stuart was hardly to blame for his part in the loss of the bullion shipment—but Stuart didn't overlook the possibility that the division superintendent might have since undergone a

change of heart. There was no doubt but that the home office had raised hell with him over the robbery.

The thought of losing his job gave Stuart a chilled feeling. He had enjoyed working for Imperial Stage Lines. There was a certain fascination to being a unit in the far-flung, bustling network of division offices, routes, and schedules. He had even dreamed of a future with the company. Being a shotgun messenger, he felt, was a step on the ladder toward such more important posts as stock buyer and station agent. Why, he might eventually get even the chance to take over Braden's job as division superintendent. And there was Lona. Working for the Eagle Creek division gave him the chance to see her often.

A door behind Stuart creaked open. He turned as one of Mrs. Tolliver's boarders came down the steps.

"Howdy, Sam."

"Howdy . . . Jud. Nice day, ain't it?"

"Couldn't be better," Stuart agreed.

"Nice day for catching outlaws." Sam hurried off down the street, chuckling and shaking his head.

Stuart scowled after the other's retreating back. It had been like that all week. The news of his claim to being Jud Silver had spread rapidly through the town, and Mrs. Tolliver's paying guests had been among the first to hear of it. Stuart had at once been made the object of gibes and taunts, which he had silenced with challenges to draw. There had been no takers, since the boarders knew of his skill with a gun. But Stuart had been unable to stop entirely the mocking glances and occasional sly remarks.

IT WAS the same way with the town people. For some reason that Stuart couldn't fathom, everyone seemed to consider his identity as Jud Silver a huge joke. There were no doubts in his own mind. He was positive that he was Jud Silver. He simply felt that it was so. Wrack his brain though he might, he could dig up no memories which told him otherwise. In fact, there were numerous things which bore out his belief. The initials in his hat and on his gun, for instance—the initials "J.S." What else could they stand for but Jud Silver? Of course, they fitted the name Jim Stuart as well, but that was a name which meant nothing to him.

The lines of Stuart's face tightened. He'd show them! He'd show all the scoffers and doubting Thomases. When he brought in Hawk Dubois, they'd all sing a different tune.

The first step to doing that, he reminded himself, was to get back his job. Sooner or later Dubois would stage another robbery. Stuart intended to be ready when that happened.

He settled his hat more firmly and squared his shoulders. Walking swiftly, he set out for the Imperial Stage Line office.

He saw Lona emerge from the building as he crossed the street toward the door. He called out her name, then hurried to meet her.

"Gosh, it's good to see you!"

The girl smiled, though an unwonted reserve shadowed her face. "Hello, Jim. How do you feel?"

"I feel fine, Lona. But my name isn't . . ."

She held up a hand, her smile vanishing. "If you're going to start that again, you can just forget that you ever saw me!"

Stuart's face twisted. "You're like all the rest, Lona. Nobody seems willing to give me a chance."

"That's because everybody knows how terribly wrong you are."

"No, Lona—"

"Jim—please! I don't want to argue about that silly idea you have. People are starting to watch us."

It was true. Stuart glanced around to find little knots of people standing along both sides of the street, all grinning in his direction. He'd witnessed the phenomenon before in the past few days, and a helpless rage surged up inside him.

He returned his attention to Lona, shrugging tiredly. Then, recalling a question which he had been wanting the girl to settle, he forced a smile.

"Lona, I heard the boarders talking about a big dance that's going to be held in a few weeks. I . . . well, will you go with me?"

"I'm sorry, Jim, but I've already agreed to go with Morris."

". . . That isn't like you, Lona. You always used to wait until I asked."

"It was different then."

"Why, Lona, do you mean—"

"I mean just this, Jim—as long as you're going to make a fool of yourself by insisting that you're Jud Silver, I don't want any part of it. I have my pride, too." She turned, then, and hurried off down the street.

Stuart watched her go, feeling queerly empty and alone. After a moment he became aware that the groups along the street were still looking at him. More out of a desire for escape than anything else, he turned abruptly and strode into the Imperial Stage Line office.

Braden was seated at his desk behind the wooden railing that divided the two halves of the room. Purdy

was at another desk a short distance away. He wore a green eyeshade and had an open ledger in front of him. Noticing Stuart, he turned in his chair with a thin smile.

"Well, well!" Purdy exclaimed in mock surprise. "Jud Silver in person. This is a great honor."

"Not if you're the one who says so," Stuart grunted. Nodding to Braden, he let himself through the railing and dropped into a chair beside the superintendent's desk.

"How are you, Jim?" Braden seemed affable enough, though a quality of reserve showed in his eyes.

"I'm feeling fit as a fiddle," Stuart said. "Doc Baines told me I'm well enough to get back to work. I'm ready to pitch in any time you give the word."

BRADEN began to toy with a pen, hesitating. "Well, things are sort of mixed up right now."

A cold finger touched Stuart's spine. "About my job you mean?"

"Uh . . . yes. You see, we got a new shotgun messenger."

". . . You hired him?"

"Not exactly. The home office sent him down with a recommendation. Sort of an order for me to hire him. Fellow's a stranger from out of town. Name of Bill North."

Stuart rose slowly to his feet. "That means I've lost my job."

"I guess so." Braden took a swift glance at Stuart's face, then added gruffly, "The shotgun messenger job anyway. The home office didn't say anything about firing you, leaving that up to me."

"But what else is there for me to do?"

"I need someone to take Hank Grover's place. I'm using Gus Halleck

right now, but he's too old for that kind of work. How'd you like to take over?"

Pain tumbled through Stuart like a roll of barbed wire. Being shotgun messenger had glamor to it that a stage driver job could hardly equal. But he knew it was his last opportunity for remaining with the company. He felt a glow of gratitude toward Braden for giving him the chance.

He nodded. "I'll take the job. Thanks, Mr. Braden."

The superintendent waved one hand in a gesture of denial. "Don't get the idea I'm doing any favors. Just need a stage driver, that's all. You're young and know the roads. Besides, you've had some experience with the company."

Stuart sat down again, glancing at Purdy. The cashier's blond features were twisted in a scowl. It was evident to Stuart that Purdy had been hoping for his complete dismissal. The obvious reason for that was Lona. Even with his fancy clothes and husky good looks, it seemed that Purdy was not certain of the girl.

The few formalities connected with Stuart's new job were soon completed. As he prepared to leave, he heard a stagecoach come thundering into the lot behind the office, where the barns and storage sheds were located. A moment later a man strode briskly into the office, a canvas sack slung over one shoulder.

Braden rose, indicating the newcomer. "This is Bill North, Jim. Bill, I want you to meet your new driver, Jim Stuart."

North grinned instantly and reached for Stuart's hand. He was a little over average height, spare, but with a suggestion of rawhide strength. His features were lean and

weathered, creased with lines suggestive of a humorous and easy-going nature. His light-blue eyes were clear and direct. He wore simple, nondescript clothes.

Stuart had been prepared not to like North, blaming the other for having deprived him of his former job. But under the man's friendly gaze, his reserve somehow melted away, and he found himself grinning back. He said:

"There's kind of a misunderstanding about my name. Folks keep calling me Jim Stuart, but the handle's Jud Silver, far as I know."

North nodded his faintly gray-streaked, sandy head, a quick sympathy in his face. "I heard about it. You can call yourself any name you like, where I'm concerned."

"Playing along with a loony only makes them worse," Purdy warned.

North said nothing. He glanced briefly at Purdy's clothes, and somehow there was disapproval in the look, a faint contempt, though hardly a shadow of expression touched his brown features. He turned back to Stuart and said quietly, "I think we'll get along, Jud."

STUART found, in the days following, that Bill North had not guessed wrong. The friendship that had sprung up between them in the division office grew deeper. Stuart had felt an urgent need for someone to confide in, someone to understand and sympathize. Bill North proved to be that person. He seemed more than just tolerant. His interest in Stuart's problems had all the earmarks of genuine sincerity.

A feeling of peace came to Stuart on the long runs between Eagle Creek and Mountain City. Only when among other people did his old sense

of insecurity and bewilderment return. It was somehow like living in two worlds at the same time—one dominated by the quiet sympathy of Bill North, the other marked by derisive voices and pitying glances, figures that crossed the street to avoid him, faces that looked at him with a mask-like, careful reserve, as though he were a person whom it would be dangerous to exicte.

Stuart tried often to tell himself that he didn't care, that a time would come when he would show everyone how wrong they had been. But whenever he thought of Lona he was unable to overcome his misery and hurt. The girl didn't exactly avoid him, but she was cool and impersonal, as if he had become a stranger. What made the thought of Lona all the more painful was the fact that she seemed to be growing seriously interested in Morris Purdy. They went everywhere together, picnics, parties, and dances, and the jeering, self-satisfied smile that appeared on Purdy's blond features when he glanced at Stuart hinted of things that made Stuart sick with fury.

Stuart knew that the only way to change the attitude of others toward him was somehow to prove that he was actually the person he claimed himself to be. The most effective way of doing this, he felt, was by capturing Hawk Dubois. That would be an act typical of Jud Silver, the famous lawman and gunfighter, whose exploits were a legend throughout the West.

Often, in the long hours spent on the driver's seat of a racing Concord, Stuart wracked his mind for some way he could trap Dubois. The outlaw had been quiet since his last robbery, in which Stuart had been in-

volved, but Stuart was certain that he would pop up again. And Stuart knew that Dubois would be well protected by the guns of his gang when he did. What Stuart wanted was some sort of a scheme that would take Dubois by surprise and give him and Bill North the chance to get their guns into action.

Stuart thought about it doggedly, discarding one idea after another. And then, one day after a hostler at the stage line lot gave a demonstration with an old-fashioned cap and ball pistol, Stuart had the solution. He knew how he was going to surprise Hawk Dubois. All that was needed now was something to bring the outlaw out of hiding. A valuable shipment would do that—and the shipment itself was not long in materializing.

One evening, when they returned from a haul to Mountain City, Braden called Stuart and North into the office. The superintendent was unusually solemn. Even Purdy looked grave as he watched from his desk nearby.

"Fifteen-thousand in bullion came in from Fort Gurney this afternoon," Braden announced. "It has to go to Mountain City in the morning." He paused, his face turning grimly earnest. "This shipment has to go through! There's going to be serious trouble if anything happens to it. I got a letter from the general manager at the home office, and he says he'll fire every single one of us if this shipment is lost."

Braden paused again, his somber glance flicking from Stuart to North. "Do you hear that? My job depends on the shipment getting through."

Stuart nodded quickly. "I have an idea about how to—"

BRADEN pounded his desk. I'm not interested in your ideas! Now, the thing to do is to see that nothing happens to the shipment. I intend to have Sheriff Lundstret and a couple of his deputies in the coach. Lundstret has been trying to get Dubois, and this will give him his chance. If Dubois and his gang show up, they'll find a hot welcome waiting for them."

Stuart said, "If you'll let me have a word, sir . . ."

Braden's lips tightened in exasperation. "Well?"

"Dubois always seems to know when we're carrying a valuable shipment. The only time he shows up is when there's bullion or something like that inside the coach. That means he'll know Lundstret is going along with us."

"So what? That'll scare him off and make sure that the shipment reaches Mountain City."

"But it won't catch him. That's the only way to stop Dubois completely. Lundstret can't go along with us every time we carry a valuable shipment. Sooner or later Dubois is going to steal a jump on us. As long as he's loose, our shipments will never be safe—and we'll never be sure of our jobs, either."

Braden nodded slowly, a reluctant despair in his face. "I guess that's true enough. We've got to do something, then—but what on earth can we do? Dubois has our hands tied as long as he has a way of finding out about our plans."

"That depends on the plans," Stuart returned quickly. "If there's a bunch of men in on them, Dubois' spies in town are sure to find out. But if there's only me and Bill North, Dubois won't suspect anything."

"I don't get it," Braden muttered. "What can you and Bill do alone?"

Stuart grinned eagerly. "Like I said before, I have an idea. It's to fix up a sort of surprise-gadget that'll give me and Bill the chance to go for our guns when Dubois stops the stage. This gadget is just a small wooden box filled with gunpowder, a cap set in a hole drilled into one side, and a strip of spring steel to hit the cap and make the gunpowder go off. Just like an old gun Buck, the hostler, showed me a short while back.

"Anyway, the gadget can be rigged up inside the box under the driver's seat on the stage. If somebody orders you to climb down, all you have to do on your way is pull a piece of string sticking out through a hole drilled into the side of the seat box. The string releases the strip of steel, the strip hits the cap, and—bang! Why, Dubois and his gang would jump a mile high. And while they were still jumping, Bill and I could fill them with lead."

Stuart gazed hopefully at Braden. "What do you think of it?"

The superintendent snorted. "I think it's one of the craziest, hare-brained things I've ever heard."

"But that's just the reason it would work," North pointed out swiftly. "I think Jud's idea is a good one. Dubois won't be expecting anything like that."

"Jud, eh?" Braden said. "I'm beginning to wonder if you aren't a little cracked, too."

North grinned and shrugged. "Maybe—but I can still use a gun, and that's the important thing."

Braden gazed thoughtfully at the messenger, worrying his lip. Then

he transferred his scrutiny to Stuart. "How long would it take to fix up this gadget of yours?"

"I've been working on it, and it's almost finished. I could have it ready by morning."

"All right," Braden said abruptly, slapping his open palm on the desk. "I'll give it a chance. And by heaven, it better work! If it doesn't I'm going to be out of a job." His scrutiny of Stuart turned suddenly baleful. "And that'll be something Lona and I won't forget."

Chapter III

A TURN in the road appeared ahead, and Stuart hauled at the reins to check the too-eager pace of the six-horse team. The stage had left Eagle Creek a short time before, and the horses were still feeling frisky.

The Concord took the turn, and then the team straightened out again, the drumming rhythm of steel-shod hooves increasing in tempo. Heads bobbed and manes flew, keeping time to the music of creaking thorough-braces and clanking chains. The coach bounced and swayed as its racing wheels ground over ruts and small rocks in the powdery dust of the road.

Hills rose on all sides, covered thickly with brush and pines. Against the horizon mountains towered dark and sharp. The sky was blue and very clear, flushed softly with the light of the rising sun. The morning air was cool, fragrant with the scents of pine and grass and moist earth.

Stuart sniffed appreciatively at the air and turned to look at North, who occupied the right half of the driver's seat atop the stage. The messenger was glancing around him, swaying

easily under the lurches of the coach and smiling slightly, as though no danger at all attended this trip. He held his shotgun across his knees, lean brown fingers locked carelessly about the barrel and stock. His light-blue eyes seemed sleepy, but Stuart knew the man had never been more alert.

Abruptly Stuart frowned at North and asked, "Where were you last night, Bill? I wanted to show you my gadget when I finished it, but you weren't at the hotel."

North shrugged. "Reckon I was taking a walk somewhere. Too restless to sleep."

"Same with me," Stuart said. "Hawk Dubois isn't anybody you can fool with. And I was thinking about what would happen if my idea didn't work."

"Braden, you mean?"

"And Lona. Things are bad enough now, with them thinking I'm somebody else, but if my idea doesn't pan out they'll never talk to me again."

"I'm pretty sure it'll pan out."

"Where do you think Dubois will stop the stage?" Stuart asked after a moment.

North considered. "Somewhere around South Pass, most likely. It's the best place for a hold up."

"Dubois has a surprise coming to him." Stuart glanced over the edge of the driver's seat, his eyes seeking the length of cord that projected inconspicuously from a small hole in the bottom and to one side. The lower end of the cord was fastened to a metal hand-grip. In descending from the coach, Stuart had only to pull the cord on his way down. Since he would be reaching for the hand-grip

at about the same time, he felt confident that the action would go unnoticed. He and North wore hideout guns in the event that the outlaws forced them to discard their visible weapons before climbing down from the stage.

DESPITE these preparations, Stuart felt uneasy. So much hung in the balance. His job, for one thing, and the esteem of Braden and Lona, for another—especially that of Lona. If he were able to capture Hawk Dubois, he felt certain he could convince the girl that he was actually Jud Silver. That would put Morris Purdy out of the running. Stuart relished the thought of humbling the cocksure, dudish cashier.

But if his plan failed, Stuart knew he was washed up with Lona. And with Braden, Imperial Stage Lines, and Eagle Creek, too. He'd never be able to hold up his head in town again.

Stuart gripped tighter at the reins, his face grim. The tension in his mind grew as the miles unreeled under the flying wheels of the coach.

Presently the road dipped into a shallow valley and curved out of sight around a hill in the distance. Stuart glanced at North. The messenger nodded gravely, indicating that he knew South Pass was not far away.

Stuart slowed the team for the curve, the Concord swung around—and then Stuart yanked at the reins even as the horses plunged to a sudden stop. He stared at the felled pine blocking the road.

North said softly, "This is it!"

A rifle roared somewhere behind the stage, and Stuart heard a bullet drone over his head. A moment later

a man's voice lifted in a shouted command.

"Grab air, you mavericks! Touch your irons, and you're buzzard meat!"

Stuart raised his hands, aware that North's own arms were going up. There was another shout—evidently a signal of some sort—and men began appearing from their hiding places among the surrounding rocks. Stuart saw Hawk Dubois striding toward the coach, and at sight of the outlaw's wolfish smile, a raging eagerness bowed into him, replacing the momentary dread that had knotted his insides.

"Keep 'em up, gents," Dubois cautioned, gesturing with the twin six-guns that he held in his hands. "We got itchy triggers, and we mean business." The outlaw was thin and somehow pantherish, with a narrow, dark face and hard black eyes set on either side of a large hooked nose. He wore rough dark clothes, wrinkled and soiled from slovenly living.

Stuart noted that Dubois had four companions. They were the same men who had been with Dubois the last time, each as rough and unpleasant in appearance as the outlaw leader himself.

Dubois stopped a few yards from the stage and gestured with his guns again. "All right, you two, throw down your irons."

Stuart joined North in letting his weapons drop to the road. He smiled inwardly at thought of the gun secreted in the belt at his back, under his jacket. He knew North also had a weapon hidden away.

"All right, get ready to climb down," Dubois snapped. "But first I want you to remember something." His glittering black gaze fixed on Stu-

art. "You try to set off that noise-maker you got rigged up, and I'm going to shoot your ears off. Savvy?"

Dismay hit Stuart with the impact and solidity of a fist. Dubois knew! But how? In what way had the outlaw found out about the gadget?

STUART'S numbed brain could produce no answer at the moment. He was aware only that his plan had failed—failed utterly and miserably. The bullion was as good as gone now. And with it, Stuart knew, went his job, North's job, Braden's job. With it went Lona and every hope for the future he'd ever had. He felt sickened by the extent and completeness of the disaster.

In a daze, Stuart climbed down from the stage. North was herded over beside him, and they stood with raised hands under the coldly watchful eyes of the bandits.

Stuart wrenched himself out of his shock. He turned impulsively to Dubois. "How did you find out about the thing I fixed up on the coach?"

Dubois smiled thinly. "A little bird told me. I also heard about the way you started acting up after that knock on the head I gave you. Jud Silver—what a laugh! I reckon you really must be off your rocker to think I'd be taken in by that half-witted trick of yours."

Stuart shrugged. "If someone hadn't told you about it, you'd be singing a different tune."

The outlaw scowled. "Don't get sassy, kid. Remember what happened last time." He turned away, jerking his head at three of his men. "All right, boys, start unloading the swag."

Dubois and his remaining confederate kept watch while the others holstered their guns and walked quickly

toward the coach. Stuart knew that the bullion, in a large wooden box, was inside. He watched helplessly, cold despair settling over him, as the outlaws hauled the box from the coach and lowered it to the ground.

"Keep an eye on these mavericks, Pete." Leaving his companion to guard Stuart and North, Dubois went over to where the others were standing. He studied the bullion container with narrowed eyes. The box was bound with strips of steel, the cover kept fastened down by a heavy lock.

Aiming one of his guns at the lock, Dubois fired twice. The metal shattered under the impact of heavy .45 slugs, falling in fragments to the road.

"All right, open it up," Dubois directed, gesturing at the box.

Stuart watched as one of the outlaws bent to pull back the lid. What happened next came as a complete surprise. He was deafened by a sudden thunderclap of sound. He saw the box erupt in flame and splintered wood, saw Dubois and the others stagger back against the coach. Then he felt North's elbow jolt into his ribs and heard North's urgent voice in his ear.

"This is our chance, boy! Get 'em!"

In the next instant North had his hidden gun in his hand and was leaping at the man called Pete. Bewildered by the explosion, Pete turned too slowly, trying to get his gun back into line. North swung the barrel of his weapon even as the outlaw pulled trigger. The shot went wild, and then Pete was crumpling to the road, his mouth loose and his eyes glassy.

"Look out!" Dubois shouted abruptly. "They tricked us, the dirty—"

DUBOIS swung up his guns and began firing wildly as he dodged back toward the tail of the coach. His hat had been blown off by the explosion, and lank black hair hung about his rage-contorted features.

A moment later two of his three remaining henchmen were triggering their own weapons. The third, the man who had pulled back the lid of the bullion container, lay writhing on the ground, hands covering his scorched and blistered face.

North's gun was roaring. One of Dubois' two confederates dropped, a black hole in his throat. In another split-second the other sagged against the coach, dropping his guns and clutching at his chest. Then he dropped, too, his face going blank in death.

The two had provided momentary protection for Dubois, enabling him to reach the tail of the coach. Now, sheltered by the angle of the boot, he began firing slowly and carefully.

North blasted a shot in return—and then a bullet struck his gun arm. The weapon fell from his fingers. He stood rigid, a grimace of pain twisting his mouth.

Dubois smiled wolfishly, lips flat against his teeth. He began aiming with cold deliberation for a shot that would finish North.

Stuart had his own gun out by now, having belatedly recovered from his surprise. The entire action had taken place with bewildering speed, covering mere instants. But Stuart was galvanized into motion at sight of North's peril. Anxiety flashing through him, he fired with desperate haste.

The first bullet tore splinters of wood from the corner of the coach,

the second ripping into the tarpaulin over the boot, inches from Dubois' head.

With a gasped curse of mingled fury and dismay, the outlaw ducked back out of sight, his intention of killing North abruptly abandoned.

Stuart watched the end of the coach for a moment, the gun gripped tight in his hand. Then an idea burst into his mind. He bent, peering under the coach.

He saw Dubois' legs at the boot, aimed, and pulled trigger. He heard a grunt of pain, saw the legs jerk convulsively. Then, before he could fire a second shot, the legs churned into frantic motion. They disappeared from view as Dubois bounded away from the coach and ran toward the rocks on the other side.

Stuart felt a surge of disappointment, deciding that his bullet had only grazed the outlaw. Straightening, he leaped to the end of the coach, peering in the direction that Dubois had taken. He sighted his quarry and snapped a shot at the other's back. But even as he fired, the outlaw darted out of view behind a group of boulders.

Stuart waited a moment, watching. Dubois did not appear again. Finally Stuart began creeping toward the place where the outlaw had vanished, darting from rock to rock and listening intently each time.

HE WAS near the boulders when he heard the sound of hoofbeats rise to a sudden drumming that began swiftly to fade. Dismay clutching at him, he ran the remaining distance. He rounded the boulders and saw a broad, deep gulley ahead of him. He ran to the edge, scrambled down through rocks and brush to the

bottom, and glanced swiftly about him. Dubois was no longer in evidence. The dwindling sounds made by his departing horse indicated that he had fled through the gulley's upper end.

There were four horses in the gulley. They were untethered, and their positions showed Stuart that Dubois had cunningly made an attempt to scatter them. Too hasty an attempt, however, for the animals had not gone far.

Stuart caught one of the animals and mounted. In his mind was the grim intention of riding after Dubois. Then, recalling North, he hesitated. He didn't know how badly North had been hurt. Nor could he very well ride off without letting the other know what he was up to.

He reined the horse out of the gulley and guided it quickly to where he had left the stagecoach. North was seated on the ground nearby, winding a strip of cloth about his wounded arm. Blood covered the arm, and more blood soaked the shirt at his side.

The outlaw called Pete, and the other, the man with the burned face, were lying side by side on the ground a short distance away. The hands and feet of each had been securely bound. North had a gun in his lap, apparently to make certain that neither of the two captives made an effort to break free.

"Dubois got away?" North asked, as Stuart swung down beside him.

Stuart nodded. "So far. I know the direction he took, and I'm going after him. Jud Silver doesn't give up easy."

"That's true, I reckon . . . Give me a hand with this, will you?"

Stuart tied a knot in the improvised bandage. He glanced at the blood

staining the messenger's side and asked anxiously, "Think you can hold up this end, Bill?"

"Don't worry about me. Just a few scratches."

"Then I'm going after Dubois before he gets too far away."

North smiled slightly. "No hurry. I'm pretty sure I know where friend Dubois is heading."

"What do you mean?" Stuart demanded swiftly. "How could you know?"

"Well, I wasn't exactly taking a walk last night like I told you. I was following a man—the little bird who's been telling Dubois when valuable shipments were going to Mountain City. Lost him near the river north of here, but I asked Lundstret if there was anything up in that part of the country, and he told me about an old mine up there. I'll bet my bottom dollar that Dubois is using the mine for a hideout."

"Did you tell Lundstret?"

"No. There was plenty of time for that."

"The man you followed—who was he? How could anyone know about our shipments, unless—"

North nodded gravely. "Unless it's someone in the Eable Creek office. Well, it is. And that person is Morris Purdy."

"Purdy!" Stuart's voice exploded in a gasp of surprise.

"Fine-feathers Purdy, himself."

"But . . . but what made you suspect him?"

"First, it had to be someone in the Eagle Creek office, someone who was close enough to the confidential business end to know when valuable shipments were going to Mountain City. You and I can be left out, as what's happened proves. And Bra-

den, too. He'd be hurting his job by giving out information to Dubois. Besides, he just isn't the sort. That leaves Purdy.

WHAT really makes Purdy a suspect is his fancy clothes. He has a lot of them, you know, and they cost plenty. He couldn't have afforded them on his salary. That meant he had money coming in from somewhere else. I figured it was money from tipping off Dubois about shipments. Anyhow, I decided to follow Purdy, and what happened showed I was right."

Stuart said, "Then Purdy's the one who told Dubois about the gadget I fixed up."

North inclined his head. "That's right.

"And knowing Purdy would tell, you decided to fool him and Dubois by making another gadget yourself and putting it in the bullion box."

"Braden helped me. You see, we were working together all the time. There never was a bullion shipment—just bricks in the box to give it weight. The whole thing was a scheme to catch Purdy and Dubois."

"But if Purdy suspects something—"

North grinned and shook his head. "Braden told me he was going to put a gun on Purdy right after we pulled out in the stage. I reckon Fine-feathers is in the calaboose by now."

"That leaves Dubois," Stuart said grimly. "And I'm going after him right away. Jud Silver has a job to finish."

North stood up slowly. "Why, I was thinking of going after Dubois myself."

"But you're hurt!"

"Not as bad as you might get in a

gunfight with Dubois. You just load these two owlhooters in the stage and drive them to town. I'll take care of Dubois."

"You will not!" Stuart snapped. "I'm Jud Silver. That's my job!"

"Now don't argue with me, boy." North made a purely automatic gesture toward his gun, the sort of gesture an exasperated man with a gun will make without actually intending to use it.

Stuart's hand moved in a blur of speed. His own gun seemed to leap from his belt and into his hand. The muzzle centered on North with rock-like steadiness. "I'm the one who's going after Dubois, Bill! This is my chance, and nobody's going to take it away from me. Not even you."

North grinned abruptly. "All right, boy, you can have your chance. Reckon I couldn't have made it anyway. Good luck."

Stuart nodded warily. He backed away, catching the reins of the waiting horse and pulling it after him. Then he swung into the saddle and kicked the animal into a swift gallop.

"I'll wait here," North called. "We'll ride back to town together when . . . if—" North fell silent. He watched Stuart ride out of sight, worry deepening the humor-wrinkles at the corners of his blue eyes.

Chapter IV

STUART rode with reckless speed, bent low in the saddle. Distance fell away under the flashing legs of the horse. It was rough country. Stuart's path led through labyrinths of rock, through walls of brush and thick stands of pine, across deep gulleys and over high slopes. But it was level ground to him. Only when ab-

olutely necessary did he slacken pace.

Stuart knew the general location of the abandoned mine North had mentioned. It was not far from where Dubois had stopped the stage, and the river would make it easy to find.

He reached the river within less than a half-hour of steady travel. He slowed the horse to a walk and followed the heavily brush-fringed bank, peering about him. In another ten minutes he sighted the few small weatherbeaten wood shacks that marked the mine site.

He dismounted behind a screen of brush and tethered the horse. He took out his gun, ejected the spent shells, and punched in new ones from his belt. Then he studied the mine buildings and the surrounding land, his eyes intent and thoughtful.

The shacks stood half-way up a long sloping hillside, back a good distance from the river. There were three of them, one partly hidden by the other two, which stood slightly in front of it. They looked deserted.

Having finally traced out a route that would enable him to reach the shacks with the least chance of discovery, Stuart swung into motion. He skirted the foot of the hill, keeping to the cover of the brush. When the buildings were almost hidden behind the curve of the hill, he began to climb toward them, using the concealment of rock outcroppings and careful that his feet started no betraying clatter of falling stones.

Presently he could see the third shack, which from below had been partially hidden from view. A single horse stood before it. The horse looked as though someone had just rode it hard and fast.

Stuart nodded slightly and resumed his climb, veering now toward the building where the horse stood. He kept between the narrow windows in the side and back, pausing every few seconds to listen. He crept along slowly, slowly, a solid shadow drifting over the ground. He eased up to the corner of the shack, bent to hands and knees, and crawled with laborious care under the window in the side. He reached the other corner, from where, by simply craning his neck, he could look along the front of the shack.

He stood up. For a moment he stood rigid, his eyes shining with a feverish brightness and his mouth a pinched, pale line. He could hear a man moving around inside the shack, moving hurriedly amid rustlings and thumpings that indicated quick packing. Occasionally the horse nearby stamped its feet and swished its tail.

The sounds were somehow enormous in the deep hush that lay over the scene. The sounds spoke of death, swift and remorseless, but the sky was very blue and still clear, and the sun, higher now and flooding the land with soft warmth, spoke of life. It was a conflict which the next few seconds would decide one way or the other.

SLOWLY Stuart bent. Carefully he lifted from the ground near his feet a rock the size of his fist. Seconds of intense thought had gone into this simple action. He knew it would have been suicide to rush into the dimness of the shack while his eyes were still adjusted to the glare of sunlight outside.

He hefted the rock in his palm, then with a heave of his arm sent it flying over the two smaller buildings opposite him. He heard the rock hit

the slope beyond and go bouncing down, raising a clatter of small stones in its wake.

An abrupt silence fell in the shack, a silence eloquent of surprise and alarm. Then bootheels thudded over the floor, stopped. There was silence again.

Stuart kept hidden around the angle of the building. He didn't need his eyes to know that his quarry was standing in the doorway, staring down the slope and listening. He waited. Finally he heard the other step from the shack and begin moving quietly over the ground.

Gun in his hand, Stuart leaped from hiding. Dubois whirled, a weapon in each hand, and both swinging around with frantic haste. The outlaw was still hatless, and his narrow face was a strained, pale mask.

Dubois was still in motion when his guns roared. A bullet fanned Stuart's cheek, another cut a gash along his side. In the next instant his own weapon was blasting, jerking under the recoil of closely-spaced shots.

Dubois fired again, but the bullet went wild. He was staggering back, pain making a crazy pattern in the lines of his face. A bullet had gouged a deep furrow in the back of his left hand, and he had dropped his gun with the shock. Another bullet had shattered his arm, and still another had torn deep into his shoulder. He still held the second gun, but his fingers were loose and uncertain about the stock.

"Drop it!" Stuart's voice slashed out. "Drop it, Dubois, or I'll finish you."

The outlaw hesitated, agony, fury, and despair mingling chaotically in his expression. Then there was only

despair. The gun thudded to the ground.

Stuart herded Dubois into the shack and trussed the man securely with a length of rope he found hanging from a nail on one wall. Then, with strips of cloth torn from a couple of clean shirts, he began bandaging the outlaw's wounds.

His mind was only partly on the task. Triumphant thoughts were surging through him. It was over—over. He had captured Dubois. People would no longer be able to deny that he was Jud Silver. He had proved himself.

Lona in particular would now have no reason to continue avoiding him. And with Purdy out of the way, it wouldn't be difficult to make real the dreams he had built around the girl. Stuart's pulses quickened.

"How did you know I was hiding out here?" Dubois asked suddenly.

Stuart shrugged. "A little bird told me."

"Purdy?"

"He didn't exactly tell, but he gave your hideout away just the same. He was followed up here."

Dubois scowled bitterly. Then he asked another question. "How come Purdy didn't tell me you had another noise-maker in that box?"

"He didn't know. It was all a trick to catch you and him. And it worked."

"No, it didn't, Jim Stuart!" a voice snapped from the doorway.

STUART had seen a shadow fall across the floor an instant before the voice spoke. He whirled to find himself staring into the coldly grinning features of Morris Purdy. Belatedly, he started to reach for his gun.

"Hold it!" Purdy ordered sharply. "Touch your gun, and I shoot!"

Stuart became motionless. Purdy had a gun in his fist. The way it was pointed showed clearly that nothing would be gained by taking reckless chances. Stuart looked at the gun, fighting down the chill that was rising within him. He said slowly:

"I thought Braden took care of you."

Purdy laughed. "The old goat! He had a gun on me, all right, but I got it away from him. Not only that, but I knocked him out with it, to teach him a lesson."

"And so you came straight here, huh?" Dubois said.

"Had to throw Lundstret and his men off my trail first," Purdy answered. "Looked like they were going to catch me for a while. On the way up here, I heard shots, and thought I'd better be careful. Good thing I was, too, or Stuart would have known I was coming."

Purdy grinned mockingly at Stuart. Then he returned his attention to Dubois. Sudden craftiness glittered in his eyes.

"Guess I came in time to save your neck, Hawk."

"You sure did!" Dubois agreed. "Now get these ropes off me. We'll fill this meddling snake full of holes and be on our way."

"Not so fast, Hawk! First I want to know about the swag you took in from those jobs I helped you pull."

"It's buried in a safe place. Get these ropes off, and I'll see that you get a big split."

Purdy licked his lips, the craftiness deepening. "Just how big a split, Hawk?"

"A fourth, say."

"Make it half."

Dubois hesitated, anger darkening his face. Then he shrugged. "All right, half. Guess you earned it anyway. Now see about these ropes, and we'll start moving."

Purdy removed Stuart's gun from reach. Keeping his own weapon trained carefully on Stuart, he sidled over to a dish-littered table nearby and picked up a rusty kitchen knife. He tossed the knife at Stuart's feet.

"You cut the ropes off, Mr. Jud Silver. I want to be able to keep an eye on you."

Stuart bent to cut the bonds about Dubois' ankles, his mind working with desperate haste. He told himself that he had to find a way out. There was no doubt but that Dubois and Purdy were planning to kill him.

THE ropes about Dubois' ankles fell away, leaving only those about his wrists, which had been tied together behind his back. Dubois rose from the chair in which he had been sitting, moving his bound arms impatiently.

"Come on, hurry up. Don't think stalling is going to do you any good."

Stuart went around the outlaw, to cut away the ropes at his wrists. Instantly he realized that he had Dubois between Purdy and himself. Even as the realization flashed through his mind, he threw his shoulders suddenly against Dubois' back, knocking him directly into Purdy.

Purdy's gun roared, and then he and Dubois staggered back against the table and crashed to the floor. Dubois staggered back against the table and crashed to the floor. Dubois clutched at his chest and moaned. In panic, Purdy tried to

push the other from off him, so that he could raise his gun. But before Purdy could get the weapon back into line, Stuart's flailing hand knocked it from his grasp. It flew across the room, hit the wall, and clattered to the floor.

Stuart's lips were flattened in an eager grin. It was evident that Dubois had another bullet inside him. Even more badly wounded than before, the outlaw was definitely out of the fight. That left only Purdy to worry about.

Catching Purdy by his shirt-front, Stuart hauled him erect. His fist exploded against the other's chin. Purdy reeled back against the overturned table, his feet grinding the debris of broken dishes. He threw up a hasty guard and began to swing wildly. Stuart took a glancing blow on the temple as he closed in, but his left arm was moving. It sank into Purdy's middle, drawing an explosive gasp. Then Stuart's right shot out, smashing solidly into Purdy's mouth.

Purdy hit the table again. He started to slide down, but Stuart pulled him erect and forward. Again Stuart's right leaped out. The punch seemed to lift Purdy from the floor. He crumpled limply and lay still.

Stuart breathed on his skinned knuckles and glanced at Dubois. Eyes closed, the outlaw was still clutching at his chest. There was a spreading stain low on the right. Dubois would live, Stuart decided — live long enough to hang.

Locating more rope, Stuart bound Purdy and tied Dubois' ankles again. Then he went in search of Purdy's horse. He found the animal quickly enough, and rode it back to the mine buildings. He now had two horses for transporting his captives. He

slung Purdy across one, Dubois across the other, and started back to where he had left North and the stagecoach.

STUART gestured. "Well, I guess that's about all. When I got back to the coach, Bill helped me load everybody inside, and then we drove back to town."

He sat back in his chair and regarded his audience with what he considered the proper degree of modesty. For a moment there was a deep silence in the division office. Lona's smoky-gray eyes were shining, Braden was shaking his head in wondering admiration, Bill North was grinning, and Lundstret was looking slightly disgusted.

Stuart had just finished relating the series of incidents that had ended in the capture of Purdy and Dubois. The gash in his side had been bandaged, as had North's own wounds. Doc Baines had since left to look after Dubois, who with Purdy and the two surviving outlaws were locked securely behind bars at the jail.

It was Lundstret who spoke first. "Somehow it doesn't seem fair," he said morosely. "I been hunting Dubois for months, and it takes a young whippersnapper hardly dry behind the ears to bring him in."

"Don't forget Bill North," Braden put in. "He deserves a lot of credit for what happened."

"That's right," Stuart said abruptly. "It was Bill who found out Purdy was a spy for Dubois. And it was Bill who thought up the real trick that fooled Purdy and brought Dubois out of hiding." Stuart glanced at North with puzzled eyes. "It seems funny somehow. I mean, an ordinary messenger doing all that."

North chuckled. He looked at Braden and said, "I reckon this is it. You tell him, sir."

Braden smiled as if in anticipation. "You see, Jim, Bill North isn't an ordinary messenger. Fact is, he was hired by the owner of the company and sent down to put a stop to Dubois. On top of that, his name isn't Bill North. It's Jud Silver."

Stuart leaped from his chair with a gasp of protest. "But . . . but I'm Jud Silver!"

North—or Jud Silver—chuckled again. "There can't be two Jud Silvers, Jim. I have papers to prove I'm Jud Silver. And if I'm Jud Silver, that means you're Jim Stuart and nobody else."

"But . . . but—here! Look at this!" Stuart thrust forth in turn the butt of his gun and the leather band inside his hat. "See those initials? J.S. What else could they stand for but Jud Silver?"

"They could stand for Jim Stuart," the real Jud Silver reminded gently. He dropped his hand on Stuart's shoulder. "Think a moment, boy. Jud Silver is a lone wolf. He works in the dark. Nobody knows he's been working on something until after it's all over. That means he has to keep his identity a secret while he's working. Putting initials on anything would be a dead give-away. The real Jud Silver just wouldn't do that. Don't you agree?"

Stuart sank dazedly back into his chair. "Why . . . why, I guess so." He stared blindly down at his clenched hands. He had risked danger to prove that he was Jud Silver. But it had turned out that he was only Jim Stuart after all. For a moment his world seemed upset, shattered. Then he remembered that it was Jim Stuart whom Lona seemed to care for. And Lona was all that really mattered.

Stuart grinned. "I suppose I'll have to get used to being Jim Stuart."

There was a soft cry. Lona crossed the room swiftly, catching Stuart's hands. "Jim, I'm so glad! I tried to be mean to you, hoping it would wake you up. It was hard to do, and I was miserable, thinking—"

Braden turned abruptly, looping one arm about Silver and the other about Lundstret and herding them toward the door. "The drinks are on me, gentlemen. We're going to drink a toast to our new station agent. We'll need one, now. This end of the business is going to expand, with Dubois out of the way. Jim'll make a good station agent, don't you think so, Bill—er, Jud?"

Silver nodded emphatically. "I certainly do. Besides, being a shotgun messenger is too dangerous for a married man."

(The End)

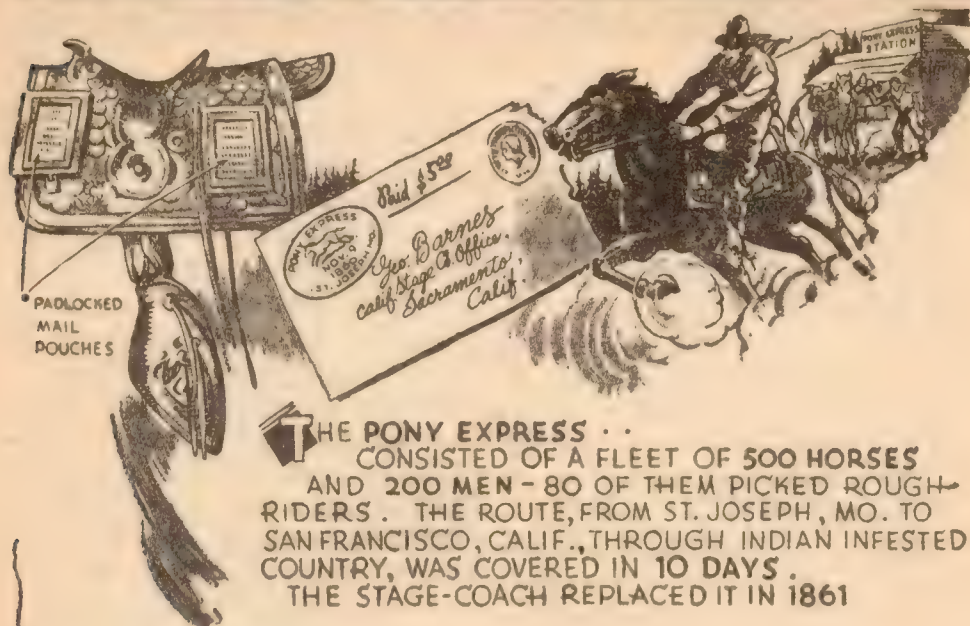
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Sioux Indian Chief
SITTING BULL ♡ ♡

WAS A BORN LEADER OF HIS
 PEOPLE, ALSO GREAT MEDICINE
 MAN. WON BATTLE OF LITTLE BIG
 HORN WHERE GEN. CUSTER AND
 HIS SOLDIERS WERE MASSACRED
 IN 1876. HE WAS KILLED IN 1890
 BY GOV'T. INDIAN POLICE WHILE
 RESISTING ARREST IN S. DAKOTA.



Trouble Will Find You

by H. B. Hickey



**A man may be down and out, with the whole world
against him because of his brand—but as long as
he has faith in other men he still has a chance**

THE MAN behind the rock wasn't so clever. His body was hidden but his shadow stretched out ahead so that Ken Taylor could see it. Ken also saw the shadow of the gun as it lifted. But there just wasn't a thing Ben could do about it.

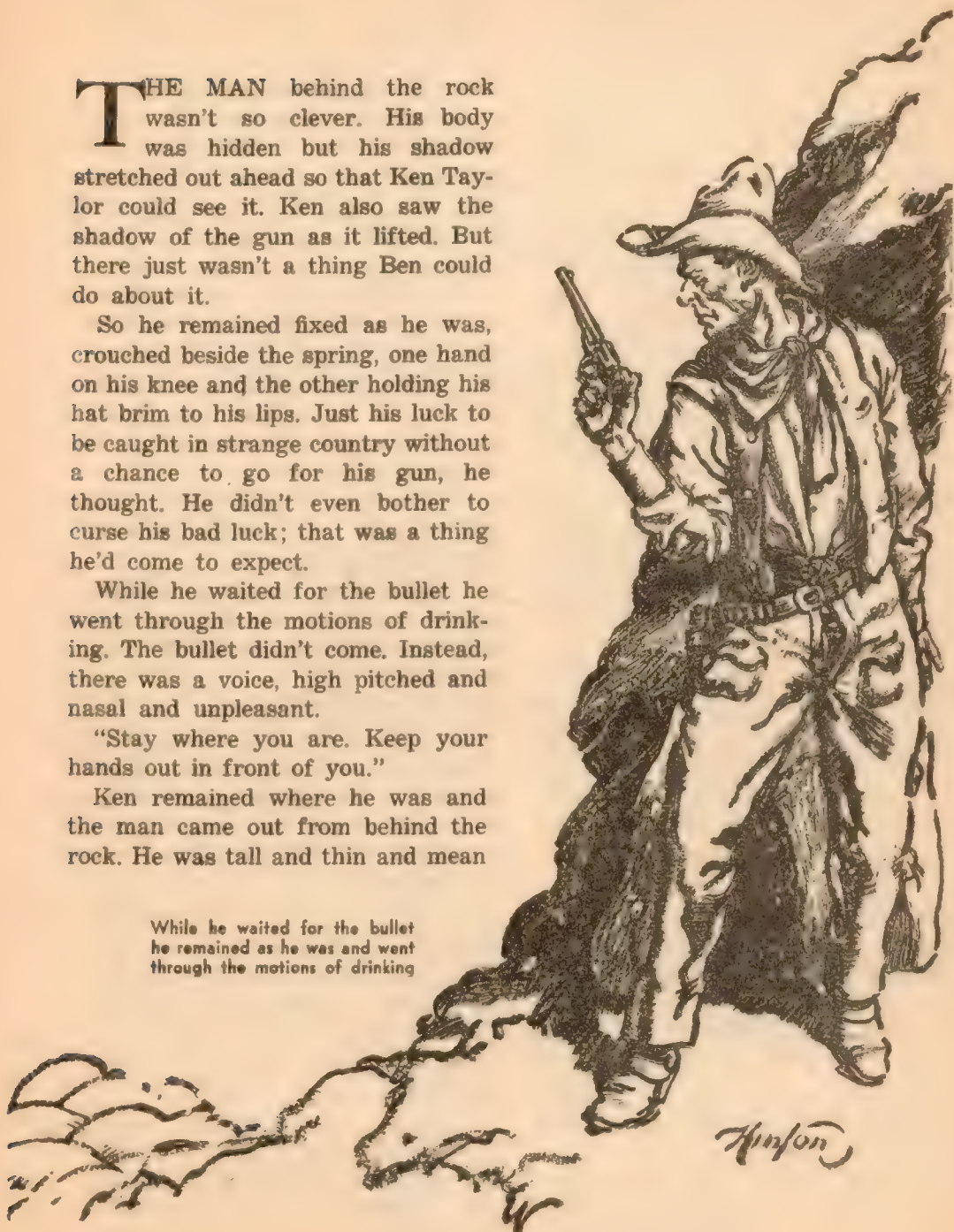
So he remained fixed as he was, crouched beside the spring, one hand on his knee and the other holding his hat brim to his lips. Just his luck to be caught in strange country without a chance to go for his gun, he thought. He didn't even bother to curse his bad luck; that was a thing he'd come to expect.

While he waited for the bullet he went through the motions of drinking. The bullet didn't come. Instead, there was a voice, high pitched and nasal and unpleasant.

"Stay where you are. Keep your hands out in front of you."

Ken remained where he was and the man came out from behind the rock. He was tall and thin and mean

While he waited for the bullet he remained as he was and went through the motions of drinking



looking. The gun in his hand was steady as he crossed over behind Ken and jerked Ken's own gun from his holster.

"All right now. You can get up."

Ken scrambled to his feet, wondering what this was all about. To his knowledge, there wasn't a soul in this country who knew him. And what if there had been? Unfortunately, he was in no position to ask questions.

"Start talking," the tall man was saying. "What's your name? What's your business around here?"

"The name is Taylor," Ken said. "So far I reckon I don't have much business. I was just riding over to the Connors ranch to ask for a job."

Ken shifted his feet and the gun waved. He got his hands up in a hurry. Close set eyes followed his hands upward and caught a glimpse of the lighter skin on Ken's forearm. Ken knew what the man was thinking and he wished he'd taken an extra week for the ride up here.

"Connors?" the tall man snarled. "You expect me to believe that? You expect me to believe your kind would be looking for work?"

"I don't give a hoot in Hades what you believe!" Ken blurted, his anger getting the best of him.

IF THIS was the way it was always going to be then there was no use fighting it. He had the signs on him for anyone to see. It was all part of his luck. He watched the mean eyes come closer and the gun gestured again.

"Turn around," the high voice said purposefully.

Ken turned and heard booted feet scrape closer. The hair on the back of his neck rose. He knew the gun was swinging up, ready to come

down on his unprotected head. He knew the exact instant when it began its downward rush.

In a single motion Ken Taylor stepped leftward and ducked. The gun swished past his right shoulder and then he was whirling, driving his left fist into the stranger's middle.

The stranger folded neatly, like a bedsheet across a clothesline. His gun hand was anything but steady now. Ken knocked it aside and used his right fist to send the other back on the seat of his pants.

Ken saw the fellow was out cold, at least momentarily. He picked up the stranger's gun and then got his own. Soon the man on the ground stirred, sat up weakly and finally struggled to his feet. Hate drew the blood out of his lips.

"You better start talking," Ken said pointedly. "I've got a little explaining coming to me."

"Not from me! When a stranger crosses my range I'm the one who asks the questions. Especially if he looks like—"

"Never mind what I look like," Ken interrupted. Hot words rushed to his lips but he held them back. "Let's forget it. You'll find your gun down at the end of this rock wall. I'd give it back to you now except that you still look sore."

He couldn't help feeling a little proud of himself then. If ever he was in the right, that time was now. He'd have been perfectly justified in slinging lead. Maybe he'd learned something from these last three years.

TAD Connors was past sixty but there was no sag in either his face or his belly. His features looked as though they'd been carved out of dark stone. But there was kindness

there too. Right now he sat relaxed, tilted back in a battered chair, staring at this young fellow with bull shoulders and the hint of violence in his very stance.

"I don't know," Connors muttered. "'Tis a fine recommendation you bring from Matt Enroy. Matt is not one to give it lightly. On the other hand—"

Yes; on the other hand—. Ken knew what Connors meant. The older man had seen the light skin of his arm, had caught quickly the sunburn on the back of the neck, had read all the signs. Was it a brand he'd carry the rest of his life, along with that evil luck of his?

"I guess I shouldn't have expected anything," Ken said. "A man like me just shouldn't."

"Why not?" Connors shot at him, his shaggy brows suddenly drawn together. "What is it you owe the world?" Then his voice softened and he said, "How long were you in prison?"

"Three years," Ken said, and in his face Connors could read the story of those years. Connors would know what it meant to a man to be shut out from the sight of sky and range and hills for three years.

"So long?" Connors wondered aloud. "And what was it for, now?" He read Ken's reticence quickly and said, "It's not that I mean to pry. And if I do not take you on it will have nothing to do with that."

"Sure." Ken hesitated, then let it out quickly. "I killed a man. I was in San Antone with a trail herd. A drunk went after me in a saloon for no reason at all and it turned out to be a case of me or him. It was him. Everybody knew I was in the right, but he was a big man in town. So I got three years on manslaughter. The

usual Taylor luck," he added bitterly.

"Oh, is it?" Connors said. A smile touched his lips briefly. "Ill fortune dogs your steps. Or is it that you were born under an evil star?"

"Call it anything you like," Ken said angrily. "But wherever I am, trouble will find me."

"So say we all.—'Tis the common lot of mankind, I believe, that our sorrows outnumber our joys."

CONNORS spoke with an Irishman's ready tongue. But there was thought behind his words. Ken could understand now why old Matt Enroy, who had been his father's friend, had sent him to this man.

"But there are remedies, perhaps," Connors was saying. In your case, two. The first is understanding, and that will come with the years. The second we need not speak of now."

"I could think of a third; a job."

Connors laughed softly and nodded.

"A practical thought. Well, you have your job. Twenty a month and keep. The work is not easy but you will not be minding that, if I am a judge."

He stirred and got to his feet. Lines of tiredness appeared suddenly in his face and there was a bowing of the shoulders that comes with worry rather than age.

"Tell Ed Stiller I've put you on," he said. "He's my foreman; you'll find him at the bunkhouse."

As Ken turned to leave, the older man gestured him back. Connors had pale blue eyes that Ken thought could probably turn cold as ice. Now they were mild.

"Only a word," he said. "It concerns the reason I hesitated to hire you. These are troubled times in this

country. My neighbors and I have been losing stock. A strange face may be taken amiss. Mind your temper."

Ken grunted. Things were plainer now. What had happened to him earlier that day made some sense. It also posed a problem.

"I think I'd better tell you something," he said. "I had a run-in with someone today, a tall, thin fellow with shifty eyes who popped out at me with a gun from behind a rock."

"Tancred," Connors muttered. "Ross Tancred. My neighbor who suffers most from rustlers."

"Maybe I'd better not take this job," Ken said thoughtfully. "I don't want to add to your troubles. This fellow Tancred may have it in for me. I hit him pretty hard."

"Oh, did you now?" Connors said. He didn't seem at all angry and Ken wondered. "I confess I have had the urge myself, to tell the truth. Tancred is a bit aggressive when it comes to range and water. Between him and the rustling I must admit I am hard pressed."

FRANKLY and yet guardedly; that was the way Tad Connors had spoken. Ken thought about it as he walked toward the bunkhouse. A great deal lay behind Connors' talk about Tancred and the rustlers.

From the way the ranchhouse, the yard and the bunkhouse looked Ken could tell a good deal. This had been a prosperous place once. It still should be.

This country was a natural for cattle raising. Grass was sparse but rich looking. It was true there didn't seem to be much water about; the spring where Tancred had caught him off guard was the only one he had seen.

So Tancred had been pushing Connors. Probably that had to do with the water supply. But it was strange that Connors hadn't followed his impulse. He didn't look like the kind to back down in an argument. Still, you could never tell.

Then there was the bunkhouse directly before Ken and his thoughts fled from Connors and Tancred and centered themselves on that blank doorway. This might be the start of a new life for Ken Taylor. It might be nothing but more bad luck.

He stepped through the doorway into a dimly lit room full of men who had finished their dinner and were relaxing with their smokes. Ken picked out a long jawed fellow with dark stubble along the line of that jaw.

"Stiller?" he said. "Ed Stiller?" The man nodded, his eyes gone suspicious in the quick hush that fell. "My name is Taylor. Mr. Connors said to tell you he just hired me."

"Yeah? He did?" Stiller had a sharp beak of a nose and it preceded his beady eyes up and down Ken's stocky frame.

Stiller's eyes widened as he saw the signs and Ken thought grimly: this is the start of more trouble. A job isn't all it will take. Or time. He had a second to wonder what the third remedy might be.

"Connors is losing his grip," Stiller said, and drew a laugh. "He ain't as fussy as he might be. Well, if you ain't et yet go on over and tell cook to fix you some grub. Then come back here and I'll give you a bunk."

Ken nodded and backed toward the door and Stiller called him back.

"Remember, Taylor, or whatever your name really is—"

"It's really Taylor."

"Yeah? Well, just remember, Con-

nors may have hired you but you'll be taking your orders from me. Get it?"

"I get it," Ken said, and was glad to get out of there.

HE could forget that supper. He could get back on his horse and start riding again. There was nothing but trouble here for Ken Taylor. He was coming into a range that was likely to explode into gunfire any day. And he was a stranger.

Then, against a window of the big house, he saw Connors' figure framed. That made the difference. Connors must trust him or he wouldn't have hired him.

Ken ate his supper slowly, washed it down with two cups of black coffee, then rolled a smoke on his way back to the bunkhouse. He found Stiller playing cards with a couple of the men. The foreman looked up at him.

"You take that bunk there." His finger pointed. "Where's your stuff?"

"On my back," Ken said.

"Yeah, I forgot."

Stiller managed to get a lot of unpleasant meaning into those words. He hesitated, then got to his feet. "Might as well introduce you around."

His voice ticked off names and Ken tried to remember them. Only one really stuck. That was Dan Horst. The name belonged to a short, stocky man with long arms and a white scar running along his swarthy cheek.

From beneath lowered lids Horst shot a glance at Ed Stiller and then stuck out his hand. Ken took the hand and Horst put on pressure. When Ken squeezed back the swarthy man looked surprised and let go.

That was the first test. Ken knew there would be others. Three years

in close quarters with men had taught him lots of things about them. Horst was Stiller's bully boy. And that meant Stiller was smarter, maybe tougher too.

"I'd better give you the lay of the land," Stiller was saying. "You got any friends around here?"

"No."

Stiller acted as though he didn't believe that. But he let it drop.

"Don't try to make any. You see any strange riders, stay away from them. Anything looks funny to you, report it to me. To me," he repeated.

It was then that they heard the sound of horses coming close. Stiller stopped talking. The horses were in the yard. Then there was a silence, and after a little while men walked toward the bunkhouse.

Ken looked over Stiller's shoulder at the door. He saw Connors first. Behind Connors came another man. Then Ross Tancred.

"Ed," Connors said. "Tancred says he found signs of strange riders on his range today. And he's missing some stock. See anything while you were out?"

"Not a thing," Stiller said.

"Funny how your men never see anything, Connors," Tancred gritted. "The rustlers seem to be coming in across your range, but you never manage to see them."

"Just so," Connors observed mildly. "But may I remind you that I have my losses too?"

"Maybe you do. If I was tallying your stock I'd know for sure."

Connors shrugged the insult off. He seemed bewildered. Then Tancred's hot gaze fell on Ken and he was off on a fresh tack.

"It's a bad time to be hiring strangers," he said. "Especially the kind who might be handy with a running

iron. I don't think the other ranchers will like the idea."

"I'll vouch for any of my men," Connors told him.

"That won't be enough. From now on my men have orders to cover all the ground they have to in order to protect my stock."

THEN Tancred had spun on his heel and was walking out. For a while there was silence in the room, Connors still with his head bowed, listening to the sound of hoofbeats fade into the night.

"Ed," he said at last to Stiller. "You will have to find out where those rustlers are coming from. And soon."

Ken was beginning to see how things stood. Connors was in a bad squeeze. On one hand he was losing his stock. On the other he was losing his range. Tancred had the right to protect himself.

Exactly how bad things were he found out the next morning. For protection against the rustlers, Connors had moved his herds southward. In that direction the land stretched away flatly. There was no shelter for a marauding crew.

But there was little grass and less water. That first day Ken was able to get an idea of the country. He had come in from the east, through hilly land. If the rustlers were anywhere, they should be there.

Along the line of those hills was the spring he had found and at which Tancred had seen him. It was the only spring nearby. Anyone operating out of the hills must be using it, and yet Ken had seen no signs. He wondered at that.

"Remember what I told you about staying away from strange riders," Ed Stiller said, riding up close. "Es-

pecially Tancred's."

They were driving the herd even further south and Ken knew that would not be where Tancred's range lay. He shot a questioning glance back over his shoulder and Stiller grunted.

"Yeah. He's up there. Others too."

Ken had the picture complete. There was this flat stretch with the hills running along the west. He himself had come in along the base of the hills until he had found the spring.

"Those rustlers must be plenty smart," he muttered.

"Yeah," Stiller grinned wolfishly. "If you're trying to run out of this country, alone or with a herd, you'd have to stop at that spring for water and then head for the hills. But if they weren't smart we'd have caught them long ago."

Then Dan Horst came riding up around the edge of the herd. He stared at Ken, switched his glance to Stiller.

"We ought to be far enough in by now," he said. "Not a chance the rustlers could work in this far."

"Not a chance," Stiller agreed. "Tell the boys to start spreading them out."

The foreman would have turned back to Ken but there was something imperative in Horst's manner. It was something vague, something that only a man who was used to the almost imperceptible signals of the penitentiary would have caught.

Ken felt it but looked away. This was none of his affair. From the first he had recognized that there was something between these two men. He sensed that Stiller's head was bobbing up and down.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked, still not looking directly at

them, knowing they did not trust him.

"Take a ride along the brush there," Stiller said, pointing at the base of the hills. "See if you can pick up some strays."

RESENTMENT still rankled in Ken as he scoured the brush through the long, hot afternoon. There were no strays. Stiller had known there wouldn't be any. This was just a way of getting rid of him.

In a way he couldn't blame Stiller for not trusting him. Knowing that precautions were being taken, a smart bunch of rustlers would maybe have thought of sending in one of their own men to find out what was stirring.

There was the urge to keep right on riding. But the thought of Tad Connors stopped Ken. Connors trusted him. Maybe, if he kept his eyes open, he might see something that would help Connors.

Immersed in his own thoughts, Ken worked his way north. There hadn't been any signs around the spring. But the ground there was hard. It would be easy to obliterate marks of cattle. If he were going to find anything it would be in the brush further up.

And it was precisely there that he found the signs of cattle. Excitement quickened his pulse. These hadn't been strays. This had been a herd, and a big one. Grass had been trampled, brush flattened. And the trail led behind a thicket.

He saw the ashes beyond the thicket. It had been a small fire, but big enough to heat irons for branding. This was where the rustlers had paused. Then they had gone on.

But where? Ken stared around in bewilderment. Beyond the ashes of the fire there was not a single hoof-

print, not a solitary telltale mark. Intent on the ground, Ken moved in a wide arc, came back to the ashes. That herd had vanished into thin air!

But that was impossible! A single man might vanish without a trace. But not a whole herd. Somewhere there must be a clue. And that clue had to be here. This place where the fire had been, this place where the rustlers had paused, this must be the departure point.

Ken walked around the small pile of ashes. He found signs that men had squatted there. He still hadn't forgotten how to read a trail. But beyond that there was nothing.

Maybe in the ashes themselves. There was always the chance a man might have dropped something. Very carefully he began to spread the ashes, working them out in an ever thinning gray film over the ground. Crouching above them, Ken failed to hear the sounds behind him.

"I had a hunch," a gruff voice said. "I just had a hunch."

Ken whirled, startled, and found himself facing Stiller and Horst and Tad Connors. Surprise held him silent for a moment.

"I just stumbled on this," he said at last.

"I bet you did," Stiller grunted. "And you were just fixing it so nobody else would stumble on it. I sent you to look for strays and you went hunting rustlers. I told you to stay away from Tancred's range and you worked right up almost into it. I guess it adds up."

Stiller's hand was on the butt of his gun. But Ken didn't care about that. He was watching Tad Connors. And so far there was no disbelief in the older man's eyes. He only seemed thoughtful.

"Slowly now, Ed," Connors said.

"It is truth he may be speaking." Stiller began a protest but Connors cut him off. "I will be making up my own mind. And I will not be pushed into action before I am ready. When I have the right of it I will know what to do. Meantime, I trust this man."

"You trust too easy," Stiller said sourly.

"Do I now? Perhaps so. At any rate, you will see that the herd is watched tonight. And I will trust Taylor for that."

It was Dan Horst who began a protest then, but Stiller silenced him with a jerk of his head. The foreman looked thoughtful. He didn't like the idea either. Yet there was nothing he could do about it.

SOMEWHERE in the night there were sounds, and Ken Taylor edged away from the small fire he had built. You could never tell, at night, how far away a sound was. Hunkering down close to the wheel of the chuck wagon, Ken waited.

There were a couple of riders, maybe more. It didn't matter. Tad Connors trusted him and that meant a great deal to Ken Taylor. If these were rustlers riding in they were going to have a fight on their hands. His gun slid out of its holster.

"Taylor!" a voice called.

The accumulated tension of six hours waiting melted and the tightness went out of Ken's nerves. The knot at the pit of his stomach loosened. It was Ed Stiller.

"Wanted to make sure you were all right," Stiller said. Horst was with him.

"I'm all right."

"Yeah. Well, watch it. I don't think this bunch'd give you much warning. And stay away from that fire.

Dan and I could see you for a mile. Stick close to the wagon."

Ken nodded and kicked out the last embers of the fire. Stiller was all right. Then the fire was gone and Horst and Stiller were only two large shadows as they sat on their horses. He knew when they waved but he could not see them. Then they were riding off and he was back against the wheel of the wagon.

For a while Ken stood, listening to the fading sound of the hoofbeats. He was tired. He got to his feet, stretched, yawned, stepped away. A sense of danger stirred him and he turned, peering vainly into the darkness.

But he turned the wrong way. Behind him there was this faint noise, a scraping of feet on the earth. Ken whirled, sensing the rush of a heavy body. He dug for his gun, knowing that a single shot would be heard by Stiller and Horst.

He never fired that shot. Before the gun had cleared his holster, Ken was knocked forward onto his knees. Something cracked against the base of his skull and he pitched downward into a darkness deeper than the night.

HE DIDN'T have to look. He knew the herd was gone even before his eyes were fully open. The pain at the back of Ken's head was minor compared to the pain in his heart. Connors had trusted him and he'd let Connors down.

Dawn was purpling the sky as Ken struggled to his feet. He cursed his luck and he cursed himself. This was the worst yet. He couldn't even go back to the ranch.

Stiller hadn't trusted him from the start. Connors wouldn't trust him now. This was too pat for them to swallow. There was only one thing

for Ken Taylor to do, and that was to get out of this country as fast he could. Better that than to be strung up protesting his innocence.

Ken was in the saddle with the very thought still in his mind. He had a couple of hours before Stiller and the men would be on the range. By that time he could have watered up at the spring and be on his way into the hills. They'd never catch him.

And maybe — it was a crazy thought but he couldn't shake it— maybe he'd run into something. Maybe he could prove to Connors that Ken Taylor could be trusted. The herd hadn't gone south. The wind was from that direction and there was no dust on it. Maybe this time the rustlers wouldn't have time to vanish.

The thought spurred Ken on, made him rake his horse's flanks. He had a hunch. And if the hunch was right there would be an end to Tad Connors' troubles. And an end to Ken Taylor's bad luck.

Racing across the range, Ken felt his hopes rise. It was only a matter of hours. The rustlers couldn't have got far. This was a question of time, and a question of what Ken would find when he got to the spring near the rocks.

Then the rocks were in sight, and soon after that he could see the spring. It was light now and he was out in the open, maybe riding into a hail of gunfire. But there was no gunfire. There was no hope, either. Around the spring there was no sign of life.

Ken's shoulders slumped as he dismounted. No use wasting time looking for a trail. There wouldn't be any. Ken laughed bitterly to himself. He must have been crazy to think

he'd get a good break. But how bad his luck was he didn't realize until he saw Ross Tancred step out from behind the rocks, with Ed Stiller and Dan Horst behind him.

"You must have a hard skull," Horst said, his scar gleaming pink in the morning light. "I hit you hard enough to kill you."

He laughed at Ken's disbelief. "Sure. You heard two horses going away. But Ed was leading mine. I got off just beyond the wagon and sneaked back."

"Maybe it's better this way," Tancred said. "Your new story is that you got out early and found the herd gone and trailed Taylor up here. You were too late to get the cattle but you got him."

"Yeah," Stiller said. "I like that. It wraps everything up fine."

"I had a hunch it was Tancred," Ken said. "But I didn't figure you and Horst were in on the deal. I figured those cattle must be going somewhere, and they weren't going into the hills. The last place anyone would think of looking for them would be on the range of a man who claimed to be losing stock himself."

"You figure pretty good," Dan Horst said. "Too bad you won't be alive to explain it all to Connors."

KEN'S STOMACH contracted as Horst's gun came slanting down. It wasn't dying that he minded so much. It was the idea that Stiller and Horst would use his death to prove to Connors that he'd been wrong in trusting him.

And then Ken Taylor's eyes widened as the barrel of a gun came around the edge of rock behind Horst and the other two. The gun was followed by a tall figure.

"Won't he be alive now?" Connors

asked as he came into full view. His voice was grim as he said, "Don't turn, Horst. I wouldn't mind shooting you."

Tancred was cursing a steady flow of curses in a high pitched monotone. Stiller held where he was, surprise and fear taking the color out of him.

"It was you who gave me the answer when you said you weren't tallying my stock," Connors said to Tancred. "Nor was I tallying yours. It was clever of you to have two of my men help run my cattle onto your range and then put the blame on me. And if they hadn't been so ready to suspect Taylor I'd never have suspected them."

"Look out!" Ken yelled.

Taking advantage of Connors' momentary concentration of Tancred, Horst was spinning around. He shot too soon, the bullet missing Connors by feet.

Ken flung himself out of the line of fire as the gun in Connors' hand bucked. He saw Horst go down, saw Tancred and Stiller grabbing at their guns in desperation. Then his own gun was in his hand and he was firing calmly, watching the puffs of dust fly up on Stiller's vest as the

bullets hit. Tancred was down on one knee, spitting blood, and then he fell forward.

"For that he was not clever enough," Connors said into the silence that followed the shooting. "And he did not think that another man might hide among these rocks."

"You were here all the time," Ken gasped. Then the question struck him. "But who were you waiting for?"

"Not you," Connors said. He was smiling gently as his hand fell on Ken's shoulder. "I told you I trusted you. And so I did."

For the first time in longer than he cared to remember Ken Taylor's heart was light. This was the end of a run of luck that had all been bad. Echoing Connors' smile, Ken thought back to their first conversation.

"I guess I can quit worrying about my luck and my troubles," he said softly. "Because I've figured out what that third remedy is. It's just having someone who believes in me."

"'Tis exactly that we all need," Connors agreed. "Then if trouble finds us, at least it does not find us alone."

THE SANTA FE TRAIL



BY HILARY COWEN



PLANs to trade with Mexico had been in the minds of our leaders way back as far as the Washington administration. When Louisiana was still a Spanish possession, a New Mexican governor summoned Pedro Vial to open communications with the settlements along the Mississippi and the Missouri. But he and his companions were soon attacked by the Indians and robbed of their horses and weapons and even their clothing.

In 1821, William Becknell who lived in a settlement along the Missouri, loaded a

string of pack mules, and with several hardy men, started out for New Mexico. They went west along the Missouri and the Kaw rivers, and then went southwestward across the plains till they came to the canyon passes till they finally came to Santa Arkansas river. They went up that stream till they came to the mountainous country. They made their way over hills and through Fe. The whole town, including the governor, turned out to welcome them, and expressed their desire that the Americans would continue to keep up intercourse with

Mexico. The next year, Becknell made the trip again, but this time using a more direct route. This route soon became known as the Santa Fe Trail, and for years to come, traders and settlers going west kept a cloud of dust in the air over this trail.

In 1824, great freight covered wagons were used to replace the pack horses. These wagons were called "prairie schooners" for out on the grassy plains, silhouetted against the sky, they looked a great deal like ships at sea. These wagon trains were, as a rule, well organized and given a final check before starting out by the captain of the train. The caravans were divided according to their length, and each division had a lieutenant in charge. He rode at the head of his column and acted as a guide or look-out. They traveled day after day and guarded their campfires at night. They would park their wagons in a circle at night and turn their horses loose in the center. At dawn they would have a heavy breakfast of meat and flapjacks, and coffee. The hunters had no difficulty in supplying meat along the way.

When they caught sight of the Rockies they knew that Santa Fe was not far away. Runners would go on ahead to announce their arrival and to arrange for warehouse space. By the time the wagons arrived the whole town would be out to greet them. The caravan would parade through the town to show off their goods and to promote quick sales. After a few days the trading would be over and the boys would have themselves a little celebration in Mexico before hitting the train again for Missouri.

For the first few years these trips into Mexico were quite uneventful. The Indians seldom molested them except to steal an occasional horse. But in 1828 an Indian war broke out when two fellows were killed while on their way home from Santa Fe. When their bodies were found, the traders became so angered that when they came upon a tribe of Comanches, they killed all but one of the band. This, of course, infuriated the rest of the red men and they retaliated by stealing horses and burning wagons whenever the opportunity presented itself. Several traders were killed from time to time, and in 1829, the government made arrangements for the soldiers to escort the trading caravans nearly all the way to Santa Fe. Mexico provided a military escort for the traders as far as Chouteau's island on their return trip, and there they were met by the American soldiers who would bring them on home safely.

This trail was a great American character builder, and our own generation should pause along this route to remember what a great part this faded trail has played in the building of America.

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TRIBUTE TO A PIONEER MOTHER

BY A. MORRIS

THE region of the Platte is fraught with historical significance. Nearly every bend in the river was once a camp site for the pioneers. Linked with these spots were horrible experiences with storms, wolves, buffaloes and Indians. Babies were born and many people died and were buried hurriedly along the trail.

One of the most treasured stories is that of a pioneer woman named Rebecca Winters. This good mother who was laid to rest in the prairie sod just a short distance from Scott's Bluff, has become a kind of shrine in memory of motherhood. Out of all the thousands of men, women and children who were buried along the Western trail, this is one of the few graves that remains surely marked. There was little means to erect a lasting monument along the old trails. A buffalo skull or a shoulder blade, a part of a wagon, or on unusual stone roughly carved, might be set up temporarily. For the most part, the graves were left unmarked purposely. Sometimes campfire ashes were sprinkled over a fresh grave to hide it from Indians and wolves.

When Rebecca Winters was buried, one of her friends sat up all night cutting her name and age into a wrought iron wagon tire. This tire was set into the grave with the upper half arching above it. This simple monument withstood buffalo herds and storms for more than sixty years. When the surveyors were laying out a branch of the Burlington Railroad along the old Mormon Trail, they found that their line would be running right over the marked grave. They read the rough inscription and were so touched that they went back several miles to change their survey so that the grave of this pioneer mother would be intact. They also sent a telegram to the Salt Lake papers. The relatives, when notified, sent a block of Utah granite properly inscribed to be placed along side the old wagon tire. Years later, the Daughters of the American Revolution discovered that this mother's father had been a drummer boy in Washington's army, and they went in a special train to place one of their plaques on her grave. In 1938, officials of the Oregon Trail Memorial Association visited her grave. One of her great, great granddaughters named Rebecca Winters, placed flowers on the shrine

Western Artists

BY J. R. MARKS

PEOPLE who are not familiar with the West, particularly those with a snobbish turn of mind, are inclined to look rather contemptuously at all things Western. They generally say, by implication, "oh yes, the West is great country for men and beasts. Maybe it's even necessary, but it never produced anything of cultural value." They look down their noses when they say this. And when you hear it, you'd like to wring their necks. They're just demonstrating their own ignorance.

Our West has produced some of the finest artistic work the world has ever seen. If you go back far enough to include the Aztecs and the Incas which is really permissible, you discover a world of artistic development that few, if any, civilizations have ever produced. Just consider for a moment, the splendor and beauty of the magnificent temples built by these people. Examine their handiwork in the form of utensils, dress, tools, and jewelry. Then try to say that they weren't artists!

If you speak of this to the person who thinks little of the West, he's likely to concede the point. But he'll maintain his same old attitude where the "modern" West is concerned. This just proves further, his foolishness.

Go to any museum and examine the work that emerged from Indian cultures. Here we are speaking of the Indians like the Sioux and Shawnee, Kiowa and Apache. True these tribes, like so many others were devoted intensely to a love of warfare and all the panoply it entails. That however, only strengthened their love for ornamentation, which took for the most part the form of lavish ornamentation of not only their persons but their weapons. Because most Indians, with the exception of cliff-dwelling tribes, were nomads, most of their art-work, took the form of this latter sort of decoration. Never-the-less, such ornamentation of tools and weapons is considered everywhere art-work of the highest type.

It isn't necessary to consider merely Indians when speaking of the artwork of the West. Look at the handiwork of cowboys, the rich ornamentation and decoration of their equipment, their guns and their saddles. The clothing that they wore even testifies to a sound appreciation of utility in art—though, if you had told the average cowboy, that he had "artistic sense," he would have shot you on the spot, probably.

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A tour through a modern museum of painting would reveal some other interesting aspects of the love of beauty among Westerners. Some of the greatest artists in the United States came from the West and based their paintings on Western scenes. A genuine love of nature that seemed to exist within every Westerner came out in these men.

The very West itself, the land, the country, the scenery, the sky, is a gigantic piece of artwork. In fact, it is doubtful if it is possible for anyone to just tour the country without seeing it as an incredible panorama of artistic beauty. There are times when Western settings appear almost as if they were dreams rather than reality—their beauty is so intense.

Art is a matter of personal taste. What appeals to one may not appeal to another. But there are still certain standards that are generally agreed upon and by any of those standards, the West, "God's country," fits and produces artwork and appreciation of a caliber equivalent to anything else in this country, or for that matter, in the world.

"Look at that sunset, pardner. Shore is pretty, ain't it? You don't like it? Did I hear you right? Reach for yore shootin' arn, pal—grab leather!" — well, almost!

DEATH VALLEY

BY SANDY MILLER

ONE OF the worst tragedies of the Gold Rush migration was brought about by the suffering of the Death Valley company of 1849. They were part of an emigrant train that at one time numbered over a hundred wagons and five hundred cattle and horses. They left the Mormon settlement of Spanish Fork, fifty miles south of Salt Lake, over the Spanish Trail to Los Angeles. At a stopping place called Las Vegas de Santa Clara the company divided. A few of the wagons continued along the original route and reached Los Angeles without too much trouble. But the rest of the train decided to try a short cut leading through the desert more directly to Walker Pass. This company was made up of several loosely organized groups, referred to as the Manly-Bennett-Arcane party, the Jayhawkers, the Mississippi Boys, and the Brier family. The short-cut proved to be the figment of somebody's imagination, which led the innocent emigrants into a veritable hell on earth. It was a region of dry ranges, waterless canyons, and hot, barren wastes.

They wandered for many days with no landmarks to guide them, and at last they were in a deep, dry valley—a region of fantastic formations and strange beauty. They were hemmed in on each side by high-walled mountains that made their escape seem impossible. They remained there many weeks, using up their supplies and finally killing their oxen one by one to supply food. The situation became too desperate, and two members of the company, Rogers and Manly, set out by themselves to try to find help. They crossed the Panamint Mountains and the great Mojave Desert and through the Soledad canyon to the Rancho San Francisquito, and finally reached San Fernando. There they were able to procure a small amount of food, and three old horses which died on the return trip. They then retraced their steps across the desert and entered the valley which they had left twenty-six days previous. Before they reached camp, they came across the bodies of some of their company. When they came to the wagons, they found no sign of life. To relieve the quiet suspense, Manly fired his revolver, and as if by magic, men and women crawled out from under their wagons and shouted, "The boys have come! The boys have come!" Many were hysterical and could not get to their feet.

In February, the emigrants began to climb the Panamint Mountains, the first step in their long journey to the California settlements. As they stood high on a ridge and looked down on the scene of so much hardship, starving, and disaster, they spoke the most bitter thought in their minds as they said "Good-bye, Death Valley!"

Today as one travels over the broad, smooth highway that runs through Death Valley, one can hardly imagine the suffering, death and despair of the men, women and little children who struggled on foot across that barren desert, managing to exist for days on rotten ox meat, and no water to lay the dust in their throats. Mrs. Brier was one of the most heroic survivors. She was a small woman weighing less than a hundred pounds. She told of how she had put two of her tired, thirsty children in rawhide bags and slung them over the back of an ox, and carried her third child on her back over the desolate trail. On their way out, they met an old Spaniard and some Indian vaqueros. They expected trouble, but the Spaniard was so distressed at their appearance, for they looked more like skeletons than human beings, that he cried, and led them to his house where he killed his best animal and prepared a feast for them. To the emigrants it was like coming back from the dead.



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SPANISH WORDS IN THE WEST

★ BY MARY CASE ★

MANY of our words common to the West came to us from Mexico and the Spanish language when California was still a province of Mexico. The word Ranch came to us from the Spanish 'rancho' which means a row of huts or a camp, and before this it meant a row of soldiers, a rank. The Mexican ranch hands were 'vaqueros' but the American cowboys changed the word to buckaroos. Vaquero meant cowboy from the Spanish 'vaca' which means cow. The original of lariat was the Spanish 'la reata' which means rope. Lasso is a misspelling of 'lazo or lacio' meaning a net. The Mexican 'curata' became the American cowboys's 'quirt' which is a long whip. 'Chaps' is a shortening of the Spanish 'chaparejos'.

Some of the Spanish-Mexican words remained unchanged. Pinto means 'painted'; and the poetic word, Palomino, in Spanish means 'young pigeon'.

Begging The Bear's Pardon

★ BY R. C. BEDE ★

WITH the Pueblos, the mountain-lion or cougar is the king of the beasts, but with the Navajos, the bear is first in rank. He is not only the greatest, the wisest, and most powerful of beasts, but he even surpasses man! The Navajo was a brave and skillful warrior, and did not fear the bear for its sharp teeth and claws, but for the supposed supernatural powers it possessed.

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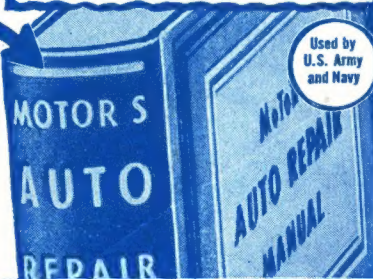


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